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Teen And Up Audiences

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

M/M

Stray Kids (Band)

Han Jisung | Han/Lee Minho | Lee Know

Han Jisung | Han
Lee Minho | Lee Know

Robot/Human Relationships
Alternate Universe - Science Fiction
Developing Relationship

Light Angst
Some Humor
Happy Ending
English Anonymous

Monthly CheckUps

Anonymous

Summary:

Lee Minhoo does his routine checkup for his favorite AI Subject (or the bane of his existence) – Han Jisung

Notes:

very new to ao3 so excuse my tagging (or lack of)
if you have any tag suggestions please let me know!

some quick warnings; there is a LOT of pseudoscience and i don't have a lot of experience w/ sci-fi so take everything with a grain of salt! content warnings for some medical stuff and fairly non-explicit description of surgery. minho is jisung's doctor, if that kind of relationship dynamic is uncomfortable for you please read with care!!

this is gonna be around 8 chapters so any suggestions on how you want this to turn out is appreciated!

(See the end of the work for [more notes \(#work_endnotes\)](#).)

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/135870427>)

Minho can't find his lab coat.

He wonders why he still wears the damn coat, it's not like he sees anyone on his short walk from his living quarters to his office. Heaving a sigh, he still looks for it, if only to keep up the professionalism of a doctor.

Not that he's any good at that.

Not with all thoughts of professionalism flying out the window as soon as he steps into his office and finding Jisung waiting for him.

“Good morning, Jisung,” Minhoo greets, stepping into his office and closing the door behind him.

Jisung is already sitting on the examination table, stripped down to his plain cotton shorts as he waits. “Good morning, Minhoo-ssi,” he replies, remaining expressionless save for the barely noticeable tilt in acknowledgement.

Physical examinations were regular for Jisung, although their evasiveness varied. Today's a fairly straightforward one, part of a weekly routine to ensure all his systems are running smoothly and to check for any problems with his hardware or functioning.

Minho takes a seat in his chair, powers up his computer so he can access Jisung's files. “Have you been waiting long?” he asks conversationally. It's a bit of a pointless question; Jisung could've been sitting there for hours but that ‘wait’ wouldn't register to him. He wouldn't feel restless or frustrated or impatient or any of the human emotions attached to ‘waiting’.

Despite that, Minhoo prefers to ask such questions simply because it fills silences when they arise. Jisung isn't entirely human, but he's learnt to respond like one in a lot of ways.

“I arrived at 8am,” is his answer, flat and emotionless.

Minho's eyes flicker to the corner of his desktop and smiles guiltily even though Jisung can't see it. It's almost 9. "I was running late this morning," he replies, clicking through folders until he pulls up the most recent examination he did with Jisung.

"You run late most mornings."

Minho swivels in his chair to face Jisung and laughs softly. "I do, don't I? Can you tell me how many mornings I've been late this month?"

There's barely a perceptible pause, "seventeen out of twenty-five."

"Very good," Minho nods. "How about this year?"

"One-hundred and fifty-seven."

Minho turns back to his computer, opens up a program. "Can you predict how many mornings I'll be late for the entire year?"

"Two-hundred and forty-eight."

centrum opens just as Jisung gives his calculations, and a second later Minho is scanning over Jisung's brain functioning, noting his levels and seeing how active he is.

"Was I correct?" Jisung asks after a moment.

Minho smiles, waiting until he's opened Jisung's limbic interface to answer, "you know you are."

"You should confirm."

Technically, Jisung is right. Vocal confirmation of a completed task does help Jisung's processors in filtering what he's doing, how he needs to do it and how well he does it. However, that's mostly for higher order tasks. Calculations don't require confirmation. Minho just knows Jisung enjoys it, although Minho still isn't sure if that's the right way to describe it.

Still, with his eyes fixed on the screen, Minho says, "That's correct. Well done, Jisung."

Minho watches as Jisung's limbic signals accomplishment — notes how the signals are stronger, last longer than any other subject in the centrum program.

Something he won't be including in his data report.

"Thank you, Minho-ssi."

He clicks through some actions, keeps centrum open and running so he'll be able to glance over it for reference if he needs to, and opens up his records from last weeks examination.

"We can start the physical now," Minho announces, gets up from his chair and walks over to the sink where he washes his hands before he stands before Jisung.

"Are there any physical abnormalities you've noticed yourself?" He asks, giving Jisung a chance to report anything new.

"The skin on my hands," he begins, flexes his fingers and holds them up so Minho can see, "is drier. My research indicates that it's seasonal."

Minho takes one hand and rests it back down on Jisung's thigh, and he brings the other closer to him so he could see better. Jisung's warm to the touch, even wearing so little in the cool room, and he's always been that way.

Most of it is due to his hardware, the tech embedded through most of his body that heats up while he's conscious,

but approximately 45% of Jisung is physically human, mostly comprising aesthetics and some bodily functions. He has a heart that circulates blood, which contributes to his warmth. It's always fascinated Minhoo, how centrum marries human biology and AI.

"Your research, huh?" Minhoo murmurs, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of Jisung's hand to note the texture. It's drier, the skin a little taut and wrinkled. Moisturizer might not be the easy fix for it, not if it'll risk damaging his tech.

"Yes. I wanted to understand why the skin became dry."

Minhoo hums, "I bet you did." Jisung had a tendency to want to understand. "I'll see what I can do about it, but for now just let me know if it effects any motor activity."

Jisung nods his acknowledgement.

"Stand up for me now," Minhoo instructs, and Jisung does as he's told.

With a careful eye and a light hand, Minhoo inspects Jisung's body for any irregularities — bumps, growths, marks — starting with his chest and arms and moving down his legs before doing the same from the back. His skin is smooth, barely a mark on it with the biggest blemish being a large surgery scar at the base of his neck from two years ago when new hardware was added to his centrum. Minhoo performed the surgery himself.

He runs his finger over the scar, checking for bumps or changes to texture, and Jisung shivers slightly.

"Is it tender?" Minhoo asks.

Jisung shakes his head.

"What do you feel, then?" he runs his finger over the scar again, and Jisung reacts just the same. Odd.

"It feels sensitive. Ticklish is not the correct description, but it's the most accurate." The answer comes slowly, indicating he doesn't feel entirely confident, and Minhoo wonders why.

"Almost like it tingles?" Minhoo suggests.

"That's accurate too."

Minhoo nods to himself, mentally noting the change. The scar had been sensitive during recovery, but this is the first time since it's fully healed that it had produced a physical reaction from Jisung.

"Alright, aside from that you're perfect. Lie down, please."

Jisung moves gracefully, barely makes a sound until he makes contact with the fabric of the examination table.

More careful than before, and with a firmer hand, Minhoo feels around Jisung's chest and stomach, inspecting any changes in Jisung's internal organs. Most of his organs aren't biologically human. Most of his lower abdomen is metal and wires, designed to emulate how that part of the body would feel for a human. It's soft to the touch, when Minhoo presses down there's no resistance. His respiratory and circulatory systems are mostly untouched, only changes made were to make sure they wouldn't affect the function of his systems nor would their function be affected by the tech.

The iron levels in Jisung's blood are off the chart, but they have to be.

"Everything feels fine," Minhoo notes aloud, speaking a little quieter as he's closer to Jisung now. "You're a little warmer than usual, though. Something wrong?"

"No, everything is normal," Jisung tells him, eyes on the ceiling.

Minhoo pauses, debates for a second if he should go and check Jisung's vitals on his computer. There may be a system functioning faster than it needed to be, not necessarily a problem but something that would need to be

monitored.

Eventually he decides it should be fine. temperature fluctuation wasn't unheard of for Jisung, in the early stages of the program, Minhø jumped at any minor change in Jisung — the line between what was a normal change and what was linked to his centrum still unclear for him.

The program was designed for an AI that would be indistinguishable to the human eye, so over time Minhø learned that things like Jisung running a little on the warm side was most likely no big deal.

“Has your sensitivity increased any?” He asks as he takes a hold of one of Jisung's wrists and extends his arm, running two fingers over the underside of his forearm before landing a few quick, sudden hits to the skin.

Jisung flinches for each hit although he had expected it, and the skin reddens slightly as Minhø soothes over the area with his fingers again. “Yes, but only a little bit. could that also be a seasonal change?” He asks, his eyes now on Minhø as he moves a little down the examination table.

“It could be,” Minhø considers, unable to hide his amused smile. “But it could also mean issues with your nerves again,” he tacks on, a hand on Jisung's ankle to motion for him to bend his leg. It was hard to control such a thing, Jisung's central nervous system was autonomous for the most part. Minhø couldn't just dig around to decrease his sensitivity.

With his leg bent, Minhø nudges his knee to the side, exposing the soft skin of his inner thigh. He repeats the same process as with Jisung's arm and Jisung flinches the same as before. “There's still no pain?” Minhø checks, positioning Jisung's leg back.

“No pain, just sensation.”

Sensitivity was... an annoyance, something they still want to reduce as much as possible, but pain would be a disaster. If subjects could be hurt then they were essentially useless.

“Good boy,” Minhø says, absentmindedly. “Sit up for me.”

While Jisung gets up, Minhø goes to his desk and picks up a penlight, which he pockets, a stethoscope, which he hangs around his neck, and a latex glove which he holds in his hand.

Minhø remembers the sensitivity of Jisung's scar and decides to ask, “has there been any other tenderness in your neck, stiffness or something similar?” Jisung's eyes go a little distant, a look Minhø knows means that he's thinking, sorting through his ‘memories’ to give an accurate answer.

While he's thinking, Minhø checks his range of motion, ensuring his flexion and extension are normal as well as his rotation, turning his head side to side with a firm grip on his chin.

“No, everything is normal,” he finally replies, voice neutral. “Are you worried about the scar?” He asks, a crease forming in his brow that Minhø knows he's imitating. It's almost a little odd to see such blatant expression on Jisung, although Minhø has noticed he's been experimenting with it a little, it's unnerving enough to have Minhø reaching up to smooth it out.

“I'm not worried, it's just something I need to keep tabs on,” he answers, snapping on his glove out of habit.

“I touch it, sometimes,” Jisung says suddenly.

That surprises Minhø, the fact that it's something Jisung does and that he's telling Minhø about it. “Why do you touch it, Jisung?”

“I'm not sure why. I don't realize I'm doing it.”

Minhø frowns a little. “Do you stop, when you realize?”

Jisung's lips twitch downwards, almost as if he were going to frown himself, but they remain neutral. “Sometimes

I do, sometimes I don't."

Minho takes a deep breath, thinking he might have another one of Jisung's abnormalities on his hands. "The times you don't stop when you realize, can you tell me why you don't stop?"

"The sensation is pleasant," he replies simply.

Minho bites his lip and suppresses the urge to push back his hair, not wanting to have to replace his glove. Before he could formulate a proper response to such information, Jisung is speaking again.

"I think it would be significant to note that the sensation is equally as pleasant when you do it."

Minho nods — he had mostly expected that to be the case. He stays quiet for a few moments as he thinks, sorts away this information to put into his personal records.

This kind of abnormality would have Jisung wiped; a complete reset where his current centrum would be deleted, where everything that made Jisung Jisung would be destroyed.

Minho doesn't want that.

"Please monitor the times you touch your scar, I want you to tell me when it happens as well as why, if you know why. I'll need analogue time, too, so I can track your centrum centers when it's happening," Minho tells him, voice firm. "And if you can, Jisung, try to be aware of who is around you when you do it." There's a warning there, and he knows Jisung will be able to pick it up.

he's telling Jisung not to do it in front of anyone.

"Yes, Minho-ssi."

"I want to check your mouth," he tells him, "are you going to be okay with the latex?" It's procedure to use gloves, and a tongue depressor too, but Jisung has told him recently that he finds both the sensation and taste of the wood and latex unpleasant — another one of his abnormalities.

Minho had been fine to concede on the tongue depressor seeing as Jisung prefers it less to the latex, but he still feels bad using the gloves when he knows Jisung doesn't like it.

"Can you not feel better without the gloves?" Jisung asks, this being his version of brattiness.

"It's about hygiene, not how well I can feel," he rolls his eyes but still removes his glove. It feels weird to do such an examination without it, instinct and training telling him it's incorrect procedure, but he's made plenty of exceptions for Jisung and one like this won't kill him.

"Open up, buttercup," he mumbles, pushing down on Jisung's chin which drops open without resistance, tongue lolling out easily. He fishes out his penlight and turns it on, looking for discoloration or any abrasions. Once he sees it all looks fine, Minho slips two fingers into Jisung's mouth, pressing down on his tongue and aiming the light down his throat. There's hardware lining the back of his throat all the way down his esophagus that monitors the substances that travel down from his mouth, tracking anything that could cause problems.

He flicks the light off, happy with everything, and it's only then that he realizes how wet Jisung's mouth is, saliva coating his fingers and dripping a little down his tongue.

He slowly removes his fingers, tries not to focus too much on the string of spit that forms as he pulls away, and wipes it off on his coat. "That's what I was talking about," he says, a little awkwardly.

That hasn't happened before.

"Pardon?" Jisung says, oblivious.

Minho grabs a tissue and cleans him up, wiping away the saliva around his lips and chin. "You were drooling."

“Interesting,” Jisung says, “what does ‘drooling’ mean, Minho-ssi?”

Minho bites his lip again, not sure if he wants to go through that with Jisung right now. “How about you... do some research on it. Let me know what you think, why you were drooling?” He suggests. Mostly he just wanted to continue on with the examination so they could move on with their daily tasks, but he was also a little interested to see what Jisung would come back with.

His curiosity was kind of the bane of Minho’s existence, but endlessly fascinating nonetheless.

“I will report to you tomorrow,” he confirms with a nod of his head.

“Wonderful. Now I’m just going to check your heart and I think we’ll be done!” He announces, removing the stethoscope from around his neck and putting it on. If Jisung registers the cold of the diaphragm on his skin, he doesn’t show it.

Minho listens carefully for a few minutes before moving from Jisung’s front to his back and listening for another few minutes. When he’s taking out the earplugs he’s frowning a little once more. “Care to tell me why your heart is beating so fast?”

Jisung’s normal rate is between 100 and 120 beats per minute, naturally accelerated due to his unique biology.

So, a heart rate of 150 means something is wrong, and it means Jisung should be aware of it.

“I would tell you if I knew,” he replies. Minho purses his lips, forced to accept that he’s telling the truth. Jisung can’t lie to him — his primary function is obedience.

“Maybe it’s something I should research?” He suggests after a moment has passed.

Despite himself, Minho chuckles. “Maybe I shouldn’t be encouraging you so much.”

Jisung blinks, his head cocking to the side just a fraction of an inch but it’s enough for Minho to notice. “I like to know things.”

One of Jisung’s biggest abnormalities.

His strongest weapon and most glaring weakness. For both of them.

“I know you do, Jisung,” Minho sighs, reaches up and ruffles Jisung’s hair lightly before cupping his cheek.

“That’s the problem.”

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/136018402>)

Summary:

Jisung researches 'drooling' and comes to his conclusion.

Notes:

i'm back with a new chapter!! thank you so much for your encouragement on ch1! it got me soo motivated i pulled two nighters to finish editing this one hehe

can't believe this started w the idea of minho's fingers in jisung's mouth and now i'm 20k in deep

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter 2_endnotes).)

Stasis is where Jisung is supposed to be at rest.

He doesn't sleep, but while in stasis (both the physical chamber built for him and the operational mode of his centrum system), he's functioning at the lowest speed and capacity he can be without being fully powered down.

Stasis is important for making sure Jisung doesn't overwork himself, it gives his systems time to cool down and his memory storage a chance to process, catalogue, and file away the events and proceedings of the day.

He himself doesn't rest, Jisung is conscious for all of it, but the time is supposed to emulate a period of relaxation.

While Jisung understands the importance of stasis, he thinks that the eight hour period is wasteful in that he could be using that time to do things. Of course, he's not allowed to do anything while in stasis -- physically, he can't do anything as that part of his centrum is powered down. But following orders and completing tasks is what Jisung is made to do. Being useful is how he's able to be obedient, it's what gives him purpose.

He has no purpose while in stasis.

He explained his perspective on the matter to Minh when he suggested that time in stasis could be better utilised.

When Minh asked if he had any ideas, Jisung considered research could be an action performed while in stasis.

Jisung still has access to his information drives and is connected to the wifi in the laboratories. Centrum is partially a computer, and he's able to find, consume and download data right into it.

Minh agreed, and that evening Jisung was given the task of researching the history of lab coats (prompted by his question of why Minh is always wearing one).

The next morning, after giving a report on his findings, Jisung concluded he felt his time in stasis was no longer as wasteful. Since then, Minh had given him small research tasks (usually related to questions he asks during the day), and Jisung even has time to do his own research. He doesn't always get to ask the questions he has during the day, so he saves them for when he finishes the primary task Minh gives him.

He knows that the enjoyment he experiences when he performs and successfully completes a task is due to his limbic system and its emphasis on accomplishment. He's designed to recognise a positive signal to completing a task, and over time Jisung has realised that positive means good. He feels good when he does what he's meant to.

He's found that he likes to feel good often.

The easiest way for him to do that is to follow the instructions given to him.

He's also found that he feels good the most when the instructions he receives are from Minh – an anomaly, for sure, but not one he's been able to understand yet – and so he tries to complete as many tasks as he can from him, and it's why he appreciates the ones he's given during stasis.

Tonight's task is understanding drooling, something he did while Minh was inspecting his mouth and throat.

Jisung knows he salivates, but he'd never experienced drooling before, and he didn't even realise it had been happening until Minh had pointed it out. He remembers Minh's emotional response to be difficult to read; he couldn't tell based on Minh's reaction if drooling was a good or bad thing.

It didn't activate negative response receptors in his limbic so he doesn't think he did a bad thing, but drooling must certainly indicate something if Minh had made a note of it.

His initial findings told him the basic functions of saliva, and that an excess of saliva is what causes drooling – drooling being defined as the unintentional spillage of saliva from the mouth.

His centrum recognises that he's understood what drooling is, and he feels his accomplishment signals lighting up and the ghost of Minh's voice echoing "good job, Jisung."

It's a pleasant experience – a flow of warmth that travels from his centrum through his spinal cord to distribute

through his nervous system. It doesn't last long, although he's noticed the signal lengths can vary, but he enjoys the sensation while it happens.

His next task – figuring out why he drooled – proves to be harder. Most reasons for drooling are medical, linked to conditions that impair neuromuscular control of the muscles around the mouth. Jisung has none of the conditions listed, and if he was having neuromuscular control issues it would be something his centrum would be fixing and regulating or something Minho would've been able to see in his scans and have addressed himself.

Internally, there is nothing wrong with his body that would have caused Jisung to have drooled.

He continues researching, finding repetitive articles, essays, and explanations on what drooling is and why people do it. It's some time later that his data scan picks up an entry with different terminology relating to salivation and drooling;

An article on the link between salivation, the reward centers of the brain, and arousal.

It's a brief article, concise and citing other sources for further reading. Jisung has never come across some of the terms and concepts it includes, such as arousal and desire, but he understands reward based brain functioning and concludes the information is useful.

The article tells him that the human brain triggers salivation when exposed to stimuli that is deemed rewarding or arousing because the part of the brain that controls salivation controls other reward and arousal based responses.

It also states that salivation indicates what is interesting to an individual, such as food or an object of desire.

Jisung takes a moment to consider how to apply this information to his situation.

He remembers being told to open his mouth, and in doing so his reward centers lit up as normal. He also remembers the feeling of Minho's fingers pressing down on his tongue, smooth and warm with a firm pressure. The warmth reminded him of his accomplishment signal.

He concludes Minho's fingers to be the rewarding stimuli he was exposed to, causing the excess salivation, and that Minho holding open his mouth caused the drooling as he could not swallow down his saliva.

He's ready to input the final data into his information center when he thinks of the words he hadn't heard of before.

- Arouse; evoke or awaken (a feeling, emotion, or response).

The word is applicable, because a response had been *evoked* for Jisung. He inputs it into the data file, and looks up the next word.

- Desire; a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen.

Jisung reads the definition several times, piecing together each word to figure out how they apply to him. He can't experience feeling, or he's not meant to.

Minho has commented many times on how many abnormalities Jisung has presented.

Still, Jisung does not believe he has come to acquire emotion, and nor does Minho as far Jisung knows.

Anything he feels or experiences is through his coding. He doesn't have autonomous emotions.

But he considers the pleasant sensation of his reward signal, the association he's developed between obedience and feeling good. He also thinks of how willing he is to accept tasks from Minho, going as far as to ask for more at

times where he's not meant to be doing anything, and how this willingness extends only to Minho.

He thinks of feeling Minho's fingers in his mouth and experiencing a positive sensation, similar enough to a reward response that he'd drooled.

He reframes his perspective on such behaviour and comes to his final conclusion for the night.

The next morning, Jisung waits for Minho in his office. He's late again, and Jisung makes sure to register the data for his own calculations and personal record.

He's only thirteen minutes late, compared to yesterday's forty-nine minutes, but he rushes into the room much faster than the previous morning.

"Good morning, Jisung!" He greets, a little breathy but nonetheless enthusiastic. "I'm late I know, I'm sorry." He adds.

"Good morning, Minho-ssi," Jisung returns, the same greeting he always gives Minho. "There's no need to apologise," he nods in acknowledgement of what Minho had said, recognising the first half of a standard social norm and responding appropriately.

Minho flashes a smile, wide and cheerful, in response and Jisung feels his accomplishment signal light up.

He's come to associate some of Minho's facial expressions as confirmation cues. It doesn't happen often, but if it were a problem, Jisung trusts Minho to bring it up with him.

As the signal runs its course, Jisung notices his accelerated heart beat.

He's familiar with the function of his heart, as one of the only organs in his body that's partially independent from his centrum, it's also something he's very aware of. His heart most often accelerates when he's exerting himself which he does almost everyday as part of his routine, but he's noted over time that his heart rate also accelerates in response to certain interactions with Minho.

The interactions he's catalogued includes physical proximity or contact, and instances involving non-verbal confirmation cues like when he smiles or ruffles Jisung's hair.

Yesterday, Minho had asked why Jisung's heart rate was accelerated and Jisung couldn't provide a confident answer. He'd noticed a pattern but was not able to discern why it was occurring.

Now though, he thinks he's come to a sound conclusion.

"Today," Minho begins, already seated at his desk as he turns on his computer. "We need to do some blood work and I'm supposed to collect some csf because it's been a month since the last sample but..." He trails off, and Jisung hears the clicking of the mouse.

"But I wanted to do more physio for your legs since you can't be doing much after I stick you with a spinal needle, so." Jisung detects a level of amusement in Minho's voice.

Jisung considers the dilemma Minho is describing and suggests, "maybe we can do the Physiotherapy first?"

Minho turns in his chair, the amusement in his voice clear in his face. "What? You want to do all three things today?"

He thinks of desire; of wanting... of wanting what Minho wants. Of wanting to make Minho happy, because it makes Jisung feel good when Minho is happy.

"I want to do what you want me to do," Jisung replies.

Minho purses his lips, clasps his hands together and taps both index fingers against his chin before tilting his head to the side; he's thinking.

"We'll do the blood work and physio today, the csf can wait until tomorrow," he decides, turning back around and typing on the keyboard for a moment. "Your results were fine last time, I'm sure I won't be finding any surprises anyways."

"Okay," Jisung acknowledges aloud as Minho couldn't see him if he nodded.

"But before we do any of that, I have something for you." Minho says after a moment, getting up from his chair and walking over to the examination table where Jisung is sitting.

Jisung expects the acceleration of his heart beat as Minho stops in front of him. He feels much more comfortable about the abnormality now that he understands it better.

"How are your hands?" He asks. Jisung watches as Minho reaches into his lab coat and plucks out a small, clear jar with a white, gelatinous substance inside of it.

Jisung looks down at his hands, notes that their texture has not changed. "They're the same as yesterday," he replies, holding his hands up for Minho to inspect.

Minho takes a second to look at his hands, pressing his lips into a line and nodding once he's seen what he wanted to see.

"I went to the derma labs last night to see if they had anything for dry skin that wouldn't interfere or damage your tech," he explains, presenting the jar to Jisung. "Turns out they'd already made a lotion that's safe to use."

"A lotion?" Jisung parrots, not familiar with the word.

"A substance applied to the skin," Minho tells him. "This lotion will help restore the moisture to your hands, makes the skin less dry."

"What is the application process?" Jisung asks, eyeing the jar with a curious look.

"Just with your fingers— how about I show you?" Minho suggests, already opening the jar and scooping out a small amount onto two fingers. He puts the jar down next to Jisung on the examination table, and with his free hand he gently takes hold of Jisung's wrist.

Silently, Minho gently applies spots of the lotion over the back of Jisung's hand before massaging it into his skin. The lotion is cool and feels slimy and wet, but the relief from the irritation of the dry skin is almost instantaneous. Minho's ministrations are soft and relaxing, his fingers deft and his touch is warm.

Jisung feels his accomplishment signal activate, and his body is flooded with the pleasant sensation. He feels his heart rate increase even more, his face heat up, and his pupils dilate.

He recognises his arousal, the response to Minho touching him -- that being his rewarding stimuli.

It makes so much sense to him now.

he wants to check if he'll drool again, and goes to open his mouth but remembers that he'll need Minho's fingers like last time.

Another wave of recognition; of wanting something. Of desire.

"How does it feel?" Minho asks, letting go of Jisung's hand to scoop out more lotion for the other. Not expecting the loss of support, Jisung's limp hand slaps down on his thigh and it snaps him back to attention.

"It feels good," he replies. Minho hums and reaches for Jisung's other hand to repeat the same process.

Just as before, the sensation causes Jisung's accomplishment receptors to light up, and another wave of warmth courses through him.

"You can keep this with you, and apply it just like I have in the morning after you get out of stasis and at night just before I put you in. Don't use too much, just a small amount will be plenty." Minho instructs when he's done, going over to the sink to wash his hands.

Jisung is curious to know if he'll feel as good applying the lotion himself as he did when Minho did it, but decides to come to that conclusion without asking.

Instead, Jisung picks up the jar and screws the lid back on before placing it in his pocket. "Thank you, Minho-ssi."

"All good, Jisungie," Minho replies, matching the syllable count. He does it on occasion, especially when Jisung thanks him.

It's the only time he refers to Jisung as '*Jisungie*'.

That too activates his accomplishment center.

"How did your research into drooling go?" Minho asks conversationally, moving around the room to gather what he needs for taking Jisung's blood samples.

"It was more difficult than anticipated." He remarks as he pulls up the data file to reference, including all the notes he'd made.

That causes Minho to pause in the middle of the room, head turning to look at Jisung. "It was difficult?" He asks, incredulous. "Looking up what drooling is was difficult?"

"It was more difficult than anticipated; the research required to fulfill the task took more time than it takes me on average," Jisung clarifies first. "And you gave me two research tasks, Minho-ssi. The first was on what drooling is, which was simple. The second was to research why I had drooled during the examination."

"I... see," Minho says slowly, taking the vials he'd gotten from the cupboard and placing them in the plastic tray on his desk. Instead of continuing his preparation for the blood samples, he sits in his chair, facing Jisung.

"Tell me what you found."

Jisung nods once before speaking. "Drooling is defined as the unintentional spillage of saliva from the mouth," he recites from the data he collated. "It is what I experienced yesterday. Reasons for drooling vary, but involuntary drooling is usually related to medical conditions." He pauses for a moment, waits to see if Minho has a comment or question.

Minho realises a second or two late, dragged out of his thoughts with a sudden nod. "Yes, keep going. You're doing well."

With his accomplishment centers lit up, Jisung continues.

"Understanding why I drooled during the examination proved elusive as the incident was not medically related. It was not until I found literature exploring the link between arousal, desire, reward and salivation that I—"

Minho chokes.

"Jisung," Minho cuts him off, sounding as though he was strained.

Jisung stops talking and waits for Minho to continue. He notes the blush in his face, the slackness of his jaw and the way his eyebrows twitch together. Minho doesn't speak for a moment, and when he does it's only to repeat Jisung's name.

“Yes?” Jisung replies this time, thinking maybe Minho needed confirmation he was listening. He didn’t quite understand what was happening.

“What literature did you find?” He asks, voice still rough.

“It was literature on the link between arousal, desire, reward and salivation.”

“You think what happened yesterday has something to do with that?” Minho sounds like he doesn’t quite believe Jisung. He sounds condescending.

Jisung realises Minho is doubting his findings, and in response to the negative emotion he frowns like he knows Minho does sometimes.

“I know it does, Minho-ssi. My conclusions are sound.”

“I don't understand,” Minho admits, the confusion evident on his face.

“I haven't explained it yet.”

“Right, right, explain it to me,” Minho gestures for Jisung to pick up again.

Feeling uncertain, trying to sense if it’s possible that he hadn’t completed his task, Jisung tries his best to sum up his findings.

“I drooled because I was unable to swallow with your fingers in my mouth. But the excess of saliva I produced was due the reward stimuli, that is, your fingers. I was reacting to the feeling of your fingers in—”

“I understand, Jisung,” Minho abruptly cuts him off and then there is a pause. “Actually, no I don't. What are you saying?”

Jisung’s negative response receptors signal that he’s done something wrong, that he needs to explain himself better.

He thinks of his findings through the frame of arousal and desire:

“I like having your fingers in my mouth. It makes me drool.”

Minho is biting his lip, he looks concerned, and Jisung’s limbic is on full alert to decipher his response. The experience of an undecided receptor – balancing between positive punishment and positive reinforcement – emulates nervousness for Jisung, like being on edge.

“Jisung, I think you’ve made a mistake.” Minho finally says.

disappointment courses through Jisung, knowing he’s not done something right. The negative response signal is a short sharp zap down his spine. There’s no pain, but it’s an uncomfortable sensation, something he doesn’t associate positively.

“Maybe if I explain my attraction t—”

“Attraction?” Minho’s voice raises a little. “Jisung, you drooled because your mouth was open. You were correct before, but-but...” He trails off, seemingly at a loss for words.

“My mouth being open does not account for the excess of saliva, and we need to consider that this was the first time it happened, meaning a variable in the situation has changed. My findings on desire and attraction may provide insight on that, as well as my other symptoms.”

Minho chokes *again*.

“Your other symptoms?”

Jisung nods. “My accelerated heart rate, increase in temperature and dilated pupils, for example, which only occur in close proximity to you. My preference for receiving tasks from you, specifically, which I prefer fulfilling over others. I have a desire to obey you, my accomplishment receptors are more sensitive and responsive to you and your cues. The increase in my physical response to your stimuli, physical and otherwise, includes the drooling that occurred yesterday.”

He pauses, trying to read Minhø’s expression before relaying his final conclusion;

“I’m attracted to you, Minhø-ssi.”

Several moments pass in silence, and Minhø’s expression continues to be impossible to decipher. Jisung sits still, the receptor in his limbic waiting for a response so it can act. Minhø’s quiet sigh is not enough confirmation for accomplishment or failure, and his face is still unreadable when he stands and walks over to Jisung.

Once he’s close enough, Jisung’s heart accelerates as it’s done for weeks now.

“Check my heart rate, Minhø-ssi,” he says, wanting to give Minhø empirical evidence. “It beats faster when you come close to me.”

“How long have you been experiencing these... symptoms?” Minhø asks, his voice soft.

“I first registered and catalogued them three months ago, and the sharpest increase of frequency began two weeks ago,” Jisung answers.

“Three months... Jisung, why didn’t you report something?”

“I was aware of the pattern, not the cause. I didn’t know what to report. My centrum did not indicate something was wrong, and you didn’t either. It was only last night during my research that I was able to conclude that the symptoms had meaning, and what that meaning is.”

“I’m... proud of you, for coming to your conclusion,” Minhø begins, choosing his words carefully. Jisung’s receptor recognising the confirmation-of-sorts, and his accomplishment center sends its signal.

“But you understand your primary function is obedience – you’re made to obey. We can look into what you’re experiencing but... you can’t feel attraction.”

Jisung believes he has enough evidence to the contrary.

“Is this another one of my abnormalities?” He asks. He had assumed it was, because he is aware that he’s not meant to experience desire, attraction or arousal. It doesn’t change that he does.

He’s not sure why Minhø has not absorbed the information as if it were just one of Jisung’s abnormalities, as he always does when Jisung presents such deviant behaviour.

“I think it might be a malfunction, actually.”

Jisung blinks twice.

Minhø had never described anything Jisung has done as a malfunction before, and the word has only ever been associated with one thing.

“Am I going to be reset, Minhø-ssi?” He feels his amygdala firing out the automated potential danger signal coded in the centrum so subjects have a sense of self-preservation in relation to protecting themselves from damage.

A reset is not meant to trigger that response because subjects aren’t meant to associate it with damage.

Minhø’s brow furrows and he frowns, touching Jisung’s jaw gently to hold his gaze. “No, Jisung, I promised I wouldn’t do that.”

His potential danger signal powers down, and he no longer feels at risk.

“Have I done something wrong?” He asks, wanting to be sure of his status.

Minho shakes his head, his expression softens as his touch turns into cupping Jisung’s jaw in a gesture of comfort. “You haven’t done anything wrong, sweetheart. This is just something we need to sort out. But it’ll be okay, you did a good job.”

The reassurance sends a flood of warmth through Jisung, stronger than the previous ones, and in response he smiles.

He sees a look of surprise cross Minho’s face but it’s gone in the blink of an eye.

“I can always do more research.” He suggests and now Minho is smiling, albeit weakly.

“You and your research,” he sighs, “if I’m not careful, you’ll end up taking over the world.”

‘Only if you want me to.’

Jisung thinks, but decides against saying it aloud.

Notes:

... thank you for reading! would love to hear your thoughts on how this chapter turned out (also pls praise jisungie he loves praises) <3

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/136750066>): **Log No. 143**

Summary:

Minho comes to terms with everything that has occurred.

Notes:

hello again, it's been awhile! this fic was gradually getting out of hand and turning into a completely different outcome of what i wanted, so i needed to decide on how to continue. originally, it was rllly self-indulgent but the more i wrote about minsung in this universe the more i wanted to give them a proper story and the happy ending they deserve. i don't feel too confident about this chapter and i really hope it didn't show in my writing.

Minho squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head, fighting the wave of fatigue rolling through him. He's been up for a few hours now, trying to finish the log he started the previous night, and it's almost time for him to meet Jisung in his office.

He needs to get this all down so he can send it off, mailed as a letter to his mother but is delivered to a friend who keeps his personal records safe. It's not only about having the information and thoughts fresh in his mind, it's also about not having half finished logs laying around.

He squeezes the pen in his hand and forces his eyes open, reading over the last lines he'd written.

This entry on Jisung is longer than most, only made more complicated with Minho's inability to wrap his mind around what Jisung was presenting him with.

He hadn't believed him at first, that morning Jisung was adamant that he was experiencing desire and arousal and attraction -- it just didn't make sense.

Minho knows Jisung is special, he's known for years now, and it seems with each passing week his abnormalities only grow stronger. He asks questions unprompted, completes tasks unprompted, has preferences for certain things, has been successfully emulating emotional expression, has even mimicked emotional responses like empathy.

His coding shouldn't allow for that kind of emotional intelligence or sentience, but clearly there was a glitch in his centrum at some point -- or, and this is what Minho thinks it most likely considering there is nothing abnormal about Jisung's centrum functioning, Jisung has developed these things.

Evolved.

Minho groans, letting his head fall into the paper and not caring if the ink hasn't dried yet.

He didn't *want* to believe Jisung for so many reasons. It terrified him, it made him scared for Jisung. The more aware he becomes, the harder it will be to hide his differences. He's comforted in the knowledge that Jisung recognises the risk his abnormalities poses, but that just makes Minho feel worse because... Jisung shouldn't feel that way -- shouldn't feel at all.

He's not meant to know fear or caution or any of those ugly human emotions, but he does. His centrum is emulating those responses, allowing him to recognise such things.

It's also led to Jisung thinking he is *attracted* to Minho.

It's been two weeks and Minho still can't untangle the knot in his stomach whenever he thinks about it.

He would've buried it, told Jisung he was wrong and had him re-do the research for a more appropriate answer or tell him to discard it altogether. But two things stopped him; the first was that Jisung had made a case for his hypothesis, and the second was that Minho didn't want to dismiss him like that.

The second point verges into dangerous territory, territory Minho has been desperately trying to avoid for a long time with little to show for it. Minho knows not to dwell on this.

But the first point was valid. Not only was it valid but it was something Minho actively had to investigate; Jisung was presenting physical symptoms and changes to his centrum. Minho couldn't ignore it, so they put aside time to explore what Jisung had been experiencing.

Minho had to pull up Jisung's centrum data from the last six months for comparisons, and his findings were consistent with Jisung's.

Three months ago, Jisung's responses to stimuli increased dramatically, and continued to do so. Six months ago, the longest his accomplishment signal would be active for was 8.02 seconds, with the average length being 4.53 seconds.

Three months ago there was a change, and the longest activation time increased to 12.61 seconds, and the average became 7.04 seconds.

The time kept increasing for no apparent reason. Three weeks ago, Jisung's longest activation time clocked in at 32 seconds. His average was blessedly shorter at 14.63 seconds.

Those results alone were enough to have Minho's eye twitching, but the fact that Jisung said he could recall what tasks he had completed for each new threshold had Minho's gut twisting in apprehension and curiosity.

They continued their research; exposing Jisung to different stimuli to track what he responded to.

(Jisung says 'what arouses me' which Minho would love to ask him to stop saying, but doesn't have the courage to lest Jisung decides to look further into what that word means)

Minho tried a lot of things -- visual (digital and physical) stimuli, auditory stimuli, tactile stimuli -- but nothing produced an abnormal reaction aside from Minho himself.

One anomaly found was when Minho brought in a puppy for Jisung to interact with.

That activated his accomplishment center, but the length of the signal wasn't unusually high nor did he have any other physical reaction.

He just liked playing with animals, it seemed.

Minho briefly wonders if Jisung would also like playing with his cats. He blinks aggressively to rid himself of the sudden thought.

When they concluded the only effective stimuli was Minho, Minho had the idea of compiling a slideshow of 100 other faces with similar bone structure and physical appearance to himself and flickering each image in front of Jisung for a fifth of a second each.

When Minho tested the clip, it looked as if he were looking at 100 pictures of himself -- his eyes unable to differentiate between the faces in so little time -- but Jisung had no reaction.

When he finished he just calmly stated, "your face was not there, Minho-ssi."

Minho added in another 100 faces, although he was kind of scraping the bottom of the barrel by then, and included one of himself too. Each image appeared for only a tenth of a second.

Jisung could say what number image Minho's was in the order (138), and his centrum did indeed light up when Jisung recognised his face. His heart rate accelerated too, and his pupils dilated. The responses didn't last long as the stimuli was only shown once for such a short time.

At that point, Minho wasn't able to deny that Jisung was experiencing some sort of... *attachment* to him, and that attachment was linked with his limbic. He was reluctant to call it attraction because that word came with too many connotations and all of them were dangerous.

If Minho hadn't already outlined all the different aspects they were going to study, and if Jisung weren't so determined to provide empirical evidence, then Minho would've stopped there. But there was more.

Last week, they finished up by experimenting with Jisung's physical reactions.

Those were the biggest anomalies, the things that really caused concern. Jisung enjoying his accomplishment signal was normal -- well, not to the extent he's at now -- because he's designed for obedience and the signal tells him he's been obedient.

He's not meant to actively seek out ways to be obedient, but Minho made peace with Jisung's awareness long ago.

Physical reactions to obedience or receiving his accomplishment signal (his 'reward', as Jisung has begun to refer to it) is so far out of range of normalcy that the first time Jisung talked about it, Minho's head spun.

Jisung's body can certainly produce physical reactions, but his coding isn't made to utilise those functions.

But there is definitely something in his centrum that's connected these reward-based responses to particular stimuli (well, to Minho) and have created an association between Minho and the accomplishment center in his limbic.

Testing Jisung's different physical reactions to Minho was about as harrowing as he thought it would be. They only studied the symptoms Jisung had already reported, and some were pretty cut and dry.

His pupils dilated when he saw Minho, signalling something desirable. Minho thinks Jisung's apparent *desire* for him comes from the association between Minho and obedience.

A neatly packaged answer, at first, before he let the notion settle and then it felt like a punch in the gut.

His heart rate accelerated when Minhø was in close proximity to him, and that generally also resulted in a high temperature -- sometimes, he'd blush.

Minhø also links that to obedience; being close to Jisung probably signals anticipation of an order to follow or a task to complete.

Touch... was where things became a little tangled together. When Minhø touches Jisung, his heart rate and temperature increases more than when Minhø is just close to him. His heart rate does regulate the longer Minhø has contact, but still stays slightly above normal range until Minhø has stopped touching him -- creating somewhat of a cooling off period.

Minhø was relieved to find that Jisung's degree of nakedness didn't change these findings.

He was glad that he decided against experimenting the effect of different types of physical contact, and was thankful Jisung didn't bring that up himself.

Minhø supposes that response could also be linked to anticipation of an order, but he's not sure how solid a foundation he has for that assertion.

When he asked Jisung for his thoughts about it, he'd answered easily; "When you touch me, the sensation I experience is pleasant. It's warm, like my accomplishment signal. Sometimes, when you touch me, it activates that signal."

Minhø had to accept his contribution, and couldn't understand the feeling he had when he came to his conclusion of Jisung associating Minhø not only with obedience but also positive reinforcement, with feeling good.

Minhø was ready to end it there, he had enough to grasp what they were dealing with, but Jisung asked if they could complete the final stage of experiments. Minhø agreed with only a little reluctance.

He knew he wasn't... uncomfortable, not necessarily. He was just having a hard time facing what this really meant. But he knew how important understanding was for Jisung, and he couldn't deny him the opportunity to understand what he was experiencing.

His reluctance increased when Jisung asked if he could make adjustments to the experiment, but he'd already said yes and any inclusion Jisung wanted to add would benefit them even if Minhø was slowly finding himself fearful of the truth.

Jisung wanted to test if he would drool with only his mouth open, with his fingers in his mouth and his mouth closed, with his fingers and his mouth open, then with Minhø's fingers and his mouth closed, and finally with Minhø's fingers and his mouth open.

Minhø hates that he blushes at the memory.

There'd been no excess salivation with the first two variables. There had been a little excess salivation when Jisung had his fingers pressing down on his tongue and his mouth open, but no drooling.

Jisung had commented that the sensation was slightly similar to that of Minhø's fingers, which might explain the excess salivation.

Then, Minhø was placing two fingers in Jisung's mouth, and Jisung was closing his lips around them.

Throughout it all, throughout the entire process, Jisung's expression had remained flat and clinical.

These types of things didn't register to him like they did for humans, he didn't understand how *fucking weird* it was to be doing this, and how inappropriate it was.

Minhø realised, then, that he was the only one who could make this inappropriate. Jisung was responding based on

his coding, he experiences these things through however his coding interprets them, he doesn't know anything different from that.

Minho, on the other hand, didn't have coding that dictated his existence, his behaviour and perception. He's the one who changes the meaning of what they're doing.

His plan was to just keep his fingers in Jisung's mouth, lightly resting on his tongue but keeping still otherwise, for the full minute. That was safe, that wouldn't make things weird or uncomfortable or inappropriate.

But then he thought about what he was doing, what this could potentially be doing to Jisung, and he felt his fingers twitch involuntarily -- and that's when he felt it.

Jisung's tongue was wet; he was salivating.

Then Jisung's tongue was dragging along the pads of Minho's fingers, only a fraction, as if moving reflexively, and it did nothing to help Minho ignore how warm Jisung felt around him.

His eyes flickered to the timer, they had fifteen seconds left, and Jisung's tongue moved again to settle in his mouth. Minho turned back to Jisung in time to see his eyelids flutter shut.

It was a small blessing, because Minho knew his face was heating up and he didn't know how he'd explain it to Jisung if he asked about it.

The timer went off, Minho passed Jisung a small bowl, and then Jisung was opening his mouth. Minho removed his fingers, almost snatching them back, and didn't stay to watch Jisung spit in the bowl or clean himself up. Minho walked right to his computer, wiping his fingers on his lab coat, and read the data report.

Jisung's accomplishment center had been activated for 43 seconds out of the 60, with two spikes in intensity towards the end.

Looking at the live scans, Minho saw Jisung's limbic was still lit up and it took a few more seconds for it to cool down.

Twenty minutes later, they repeated the experiment with Jisung's mouth open.

Minho wasn't surprised when Jisung started drooling. He felt that odd mix of apprehension and curiosity swirl in his gut, watching as the spit started to pool around Jisung's lip before it dripped down his chin.

Jisung just *staring* back blankly didn't help with the confusion of his feelings, but when Jisung made a reflexive attempt to swallow and his tongue dragged against Minho's fingers, he closed his eyes like before and that meant Minho could look away himself.

When the timer went off, they parted.

Jisung had gotten a lot messier this time, and it had Minho wanting to stay and help him clean up, but he forced himself to go to the computer instead.

The results were no surprise either; an even longer activated accomplishment center with a more intense signal. There was only one spike in activity, and Minho could guess what that was.

Finishing everything up that afternoon, Jisung talked through the concepts and how he related them to himself, rounding out their experimentation with some qualitative data.

Everything he said reinforced the empirical evidence; he associates Minho with accomplishment, with feeling good. He experiences this with Minho only, goes so far to differentiate orders given from Minho and other people, prioritising Minho's before anyone else's.

The way he spoke struck Minho, sounding more human than he ever had;

“I feel the best when I’m making you happy, Minho-ssi. Everything about you makes me feel good.”

Minho knows he meant that obeying Minho activates the accomplishment center in his limbic, gives him his reward. He knows he meant that his body is reacting to more and more of Minho as a stimulus due to an association he’s made in his centrum.

But Jisung didn’t say it that way, and he could have.

He *should* have.

Minho stares blearily at the ink smudged paper on his desk, knows that he’s going to be late but it doesn’t matter anymore. With his head feeling as heavy as his heart, Minho finishes his report;

Jisung is experiencing attraction far beyond centrum’s capabilities, and he understands the physical impact the attraction is having on his body. He’s able to engage and interact with the concept. The level at which he can discuss his experiences is alarming.

It’s possible he could soon understand this attraction on an emotional level, although I cannot conclude how artificial this emotional comprehension might be.

Minho puts his pen down and sighs, slumping in his chair. It’s well past eight, but he gives himself a moment to breathe.

In the corner of his mind, a small persistent voice is screaming for his attention. A voice sounding alarm bells, warning him of just how much of a disaster this is. It’s flashing neon signs, telling him of how much danger Jisung is in, of how vulnerable this makes him.

The voice is begging him to listen to reason, to not let his own feelings be blinded by this.

He ignores it.

Not because he doesn’t understand where this subconscious worry is coming from, but because he’s done everything in his goddamn power to keep Jisung safe and that isn’t changing anytime soon.

He *refuses* to become something that Jisung needs protection from.

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/137433805>)

Summary:

Jisung helps Minho reset centrum subjects.

Notes:

i’m back!! this chapter is a little heavy but i think getting to this point was needed. complicated emotions aside, i had fun trying to expand the centrum universe and centrum subjects’ autonomy!!

as always, i hope you enjoy!!

There’s a sharp knock on the door to Minho’s office, interrupting Jisung’s report on his findings from the night before.

“Come in.” Minho calls out, swiveling in his chair to face the door just as it opens. It’s a centrum subject, named Jihye, who’s standing in the threshold.

“Good morning.” She greets. “Doctor Lee, your presence has been requested in doctor Kim’s office.” Her rigid speech pattern is jarring compared to Jisung’s, the rhythm robotic even if her voice sounds as human as Minhó’s himself. He figures she must be a newer subject, her centrum still adapting and shaping a more natural flow.

“I’ll be there in a moment, thank you.” He replies. She gives a shallow nod of recognition before closing the door.

It’s always a little disconcerting to interact with other centrum subjects after spending time with Jisung. These days, Minhó primarily concerns himself with Jisung so his time with other units is short and infrequent.

That just means he’s becoming less and less familiar with how the average subject behaves.

He doesn’t have the time to ponder about the implications of such a thing, so he stands abruptly and straightens his coat out.

“Come on Jisung, you can come with me.” He says, gesturing for Jisung to follow him.

He hears a muted *click*, and knows that means Jisung is experiencing an accomplishment reward. The corners of his mouth involuntarily lift.

It’s another little experiment they’re undergoing while navigating what Jisung’s newfound awareness means.

Jisung has a clicker to count how many times a day his accomplishment center lights up, and Minhó has one to count how many orders and tasks he gives Jisung each day.

They’re three days into collecting the data and Minhó is already seeing a pattern as obvious as it is unsurprising.

They make their way to Dr. Kim’s office in silence, Jisung trailing just behind Minhó as Minhó zig-zags around people and androids and centrum units in order to get in the elevator.

Once inside, Minhó turns to find Jisung already looking at him, Minhó raises his brow, amused.

Jisung presses his clicker, his cheeks tinted red.

Minhó looks away, a faint smile on his lips.

The upper floors, where Dr. Kim’s office is, along with the offices of other higher-ups and the living quarters of the select few who have the privilege and prestige to use the facilities day and night, are almost always deserted.

Minhó schools his expression and walks. His footsteps echo as they step off the elevator, Jisung’s are silent, like always.

Being called to Dr. Kim’s office is never wholly pleasant, whether due to the experience or the reason for being summoned, so Minhó allows himself a brief pause to take a deep breath before he knocks and is told to enter.

“Good morning, doctor Kim.” Minhó greets, giving a small bow. Jisung bows as well once he’s stepped into the room, but doesn’t speak.

Dr. Kim looks up from the manilla folder open in her hands as they enter and she doesn’t look impressed.

Minhó already has anxiety curdling in his stomach, the taste bitter in his mouth.

“You’ll never believe *the mess* Dr. Lim’s made!” She says in lieu of greeting, using the folder in her hands to gesture to the pile next to her on the desk.

Minhó manages not to let out a relieved sigh as the anxiety melts away. They’re not here because of Jisung.

“Eight-- eight,” she snaps, voice harsh, “of his centrum subjects are malfunctioning. We gave him a week to fix them, but they’re gone. Useless.”

Minhó frowns, unsure of how someone like doctor Lim could let eight of his subjects malfunction past the point of repair or rehabilitation. Eight subjects are a lot for one doctor to be appointed to in the first place, but the responsibility would not have been given to him if he wasn’t capable.

“What’s wrong with them?” He asks.

“You name it.” She scoffs, offering out a folder for Minhó to take and look for himself. “Some of their centrum’s are malfunctioning, mixing signals in their limbic. Two have muscle atrophy being accelerated by their hardware-- who *misses* that?!”

Minhó’s frown deepens as he scans over the page he’d opened to. The folders are full of reports, data from a subject’s centrum and various test results.

“This subject was experiencing tachycardia for two straight days, two hundred beats per minute...” He reads out, not believing what he was seeing. “Was this negligence or did he just not know what was happening?” He asks, looking up to see doctor Kim was shrugging, her near nonchalance indicating the depth of her fury.

“He keeps saying he didn’t realise there were this many problems. He thinks their stasis pods were the source of trouble, but that only accounts for one of the subjects. The rest... well. Clearly he wasn’t keeping up with things.” She says, putting it nicely. her voice was full of condescension and dripping poison, having gained back some of her composure but still very much enraged by what’s happened.

“What’s going to happen to doctor Lim?” Minhó asks, closing the folder to place back on top of the pile.

“I don’t think he’ll be a doctor for much longer.” She huffs. “I’m stripping all his credentials, then I’ll let doctor Song decide what to do with him.”

Minhó swallows harshly at the mention of doctor Song -- the man who oversees the entire centrum operation.

Doctor Kim will take disciplinary action, the decision that everyone else in the program will hear about, but it’ll be Song who controls Lim Jungwon’s fate.

There’s a list of names in Song’s office, the names of people who’ve been terminated.

Minho thinks Jungwon might've done enough to land himself on that list.

Minho clears his throat, "and what about his subjects? Do you want me to have a go at repairs?" He's done that in the past.

It's how he's made a name for himself in the program; he may not write the coding or engineer the hardware, but Minho knows the centrum system like the back of his hand and knows how to work it like magic.

Most of the time he's not working with Jisung, he's repairing and rehabilitating other subjects. He's made himself quite valuable in that way, and it's the reason he has such sway in the program.

It's how he got himself his own living quarters, why he's allowed to focus so much time and energy on one subject when other doctors usually have four or five patients each.

"They're past that," she tells him. "I called you here because you're going to perform the resets for all eight of them."

He nods, already knowing that was mostly likely the case as soon as he realised what the situation was.

He feels a surge of dread in his chest at the thought of doing *eight* resets. He's done plenty, but never that many in one go, and despite how familiar he is with the procedure, they're never exactly *fun*.

"You're in O.R. 13," she continues. "The assisdroid should have all the subjects prepped and ready by the time you get down there."

Minho doesn't hesitate in asking, "would it be okay if Jisung assists me, instead?"

Doctor Kim turns to look at Jisung for the first time, almost as if she hadn't registered his presence until then.

"You want him to assist you?" She looks back to Minho with a curious expression. Minho swallows thickly

"He's easier to work with than an assisdroid, more like a nurse than a robot in terms of functionality. He's assisted before and there were no errors."

"Huh," she muses, eyes back on Jisung and Minho is suddenly nervous. However, the only thought she voices is, "perhaps we should look into that, for future possibilities."

There's an odd pause where doctor Kim seems to be thinking deeply before she remembers they're still in the room.

"Oh! Yes, he can assist. Take the files and go." She dismisses them, pushing the stack towards Minho who steps forward to scoop them up.

Minho waits until they're in the elevator, empty except for the two of them, to exhale sharply and let his shoulders sag.

And Jisung presses his clicker three times.

The first subject is ready for the procedure to begin by the time Minho and Jisung have scrubbed in.

The operating room is cold, sterile and eerily silent, even more so knowing that the subject is fully conscious.

They remain awake during the procedure, preliminary experimentations found that the transition between the deletion of one centrum and the uploading of a new one is smoother when the subject is conscious -- when they're powered on.

"What's his name?" Jisung startles Minho by asking, his voice quiet like a whisper.

"Why are you asking?" Minho replies, fighting a frown.

"I'm just curious."

Minho eyes Jisung, as if he could lie, before answering, "his name is Jinki."

Jisung nods in acknowledgement but doesn't say anything else.

Minho tries to swallow down the uncomfortable feeling that's been lodged in his throat since he was given the order to complete the eight procedures.

He decides he needs to compartmentalise his emotions and glide through the motions instead.

The first part of the procedure is the bloodiest; a wide incision made at the back of the neck to access the C1 and C2 vertebrae which are able to be removed to access the spinal cord. It's the closest they can get to the brainstem, and the beginning of the centrum hardware, without sawing into the skull itself.

The section of the spinal cord protected by the C1 and C2 vertebrae is embedded with a motherboard, which is then plugged into for mainframe access to the centrum.

They work in relative silence, unlike the first time which had included a never ending stream of questions, the only words spoken are Minho instructing Jisung to pass him tools.

Minho almost wishes Jisung were talking, he finds it quite unnerving when he's *this* quiet.

With the incision clamped and the cables plugged into the motherboard, Minho steps away from the subject and walks towards the computer where the cables are connected.

He leaves Jisung to monitor the surgery site, the only thing he'll have to do until they begin the Cerebrospinal Fluid transfusion.

Stripping off his bloody gloves, Minho sterilizes his hands and puts on a new pair before finally sitting in the

chair.

The screens in front of him display the raw code of Jinki's centrum.

The centrum program Minhø can access on the computers throughout the facility allow a very minimal amount of control over a subject's centrum. Mostly, the computer programs are for data display, for monitoring. It's an ongoing brain scan, an easy way to peruse the internal mechanisms of the system and its functioning.

Minhø can't *do* much to the centrum using the corresponding computer program.

But right now, he has everything that *is* Jinki -- that makes him who he is, that controls his every thought and process and experience -- he has it in the palm of his hand.

The second part of the procedure is the deletion of this code, shutting down and emptying each part of Jinki's centrum so all that remains is the hardware.

This part can be... difficult, if Minhø thinks about it too much. It never was, at first. The first two dozen times he completed the procedure felt like wiping the hard drive of a corrupted computer.

But then Jisung began presenting abnormalities, and things changed.

The first time Jisung assisted with the procedure was the biggest turning point for Minhø.

Even now he still thinks about how the cadence of Jisung's voice changed as he kept asking questions throughout the surgery, how each answer gave way to a new layer of realisation and understanding.

Minhø finds his compartmentalisation breaking down, briefly wondering how participating in this procedure could be affecting Jisung.

If it registers on an emotional level, if maybe they're at that point yet.

"Minhø-ssi?" Jisung's voice cuts through the thick silence, startling Minhø for a second time.

"Yes?" Minhø's voice is hoarse.

"Are you commencing the next stage?" Jisung asks, prompting Minhø.

"Um, yes. Commencing now," Minhø answers, speaking a little louder.

"Jinki," he addresses the subject. "I'm going to begin shutting down your centrum, if there is an error during this process you must tell us."

"Yes, doctor Lee." Comes Jinki's distant reply.

It's part of why the subject's remain conscious -- aside from syncing benefits, the centrum is still functional, and until speech is removed from it's processes, the subject is able to communicate. The centrum can read if there is an error up until around the same time, meaning any potential problems can be known and dealt with before the new coding is uploaded.

It's useful.

Minhø is struck with the thought of how cruel it is.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Minhø brings up the command prompt, and starts typing in the coding for *deletion*, beginning with the motor cortex.

For a while, Minhø is caught between typing code and monitoring the screens to watch the deletion process, but there is a break where the code is buffering -- a short lag in the system when it's functioning as quickly as it is.

Minhø takes the opportunity to glance up and almost gasps when he sees it.

Jisung's hand, now gloveless, slowly carding through Jinki's hair.

The computer gives a series of beeps, indicating that a new line of code has been read and implemented -- the next portion of the centrum is being wiped.

Minhø is distracted enough to ignore it.

He keeps watching, just for a few more seconds.

It's enough for him to see Jisung pause in his ministrations to lean forward and... whisper into Jinki's ear.

Minhø blinks slowly, tears his eyes away from the sight to focus back on what he's meant to be doing, and tries not to think about it.

But it's too late; he saw enough to know that Jisung is *comforting* Jinki.

The next line of code he has to type is to delete Jinki's auditory processor. Minhø ignores the tremble in his hands.

His somatosensory cortex was shut down fifteen minutes ago.

Minhø works quicker, keeps his eyes darting between his keyboard and the screens and blocks out any other thought that threatens to pop up.

Fifteen minutes later and Minhø is finished.

He lets his head fall into his hands, takes a few seconds to come down from the daze he'd worked himself into.

They couldn't leave the subject as they were for too long, maybe twenty minutes at most, but he needs to talk to Jisung before they continue.

"Jisung, come scrub in again," Minhø calls for him, doesn't look in his direction as he gets up from the chair and walks to the sink himself, he notes how wobbly his knees feel.

Minhø stands beside Jisung and watches as he meticulously washes his hands and arms, carefully following protocol.

He tries to look at his face, makes the mistake of thinking he'd be able to understand what Jisung could be feeling -- but that's *too human*.

Jisung's face is neutral, gaze focused on his hands. There is no emotion there, as it should be.

Minho's still firm on the conclusion that Jisung *can't* feel emotion, but over the last few weeks he keeps finding himself entertaining the possibility inadvertently; looking for facial expressions or other body language cues, paying close attention to his choice of words.

It's as if he forgets that Jisung can't hide his thoughts, not if Minho asks for them.

To think he can do otherwise is forgetting what Jisung is at his core, and that is not a good thing.

Not for Minho.

"What were you doing before, Jisung?" Minho asks quietly, just loud enough to be heard over the stream of water. "When you were touching the subject's hair and talking in their ear?"

"I was mimicking actions that make me feel good," Jisung replies easily. "When you brush your fingers through my hair and give me confirmation, it activates my accomplishment center -- it makes me feel good."

Minho's heart gives a painful squeeze; there's too much to deal with, too much to discuss and break down, to understand exactly what motivated Jisung to mimic those actions.

Jisung wanted to make the subject feel good.

Minho swallows, and it's then he fully registers the lump in his throat choking him up and the burning behind his eyes.

The idea of Jisung wanting to help the subject, make them feel good, was too much for him. Jisung had never displayed that level of empathy before -- it was an independent action, something he chose to do himself, something he wanted to do.

Minho knows that, as an unprompted task, Jisung would not have received any reward responses for such an action, at least he doesn't think he would be able to.

If there was no reward response, then Jisung wasn't looking to make himself feel good. He wasn't motivated by his own *desires*. he just wanted to help Jinki.

Bombarded with too many thoughts and feelings, Minho doesn't realise Jisung has finished washing up and is facing him with his arms held out, waiting.

It's only when Jisung asks, "are you crying, Minho-ssi?" does Minho register the wetness on his face.

Minho snuffles and gives in to the urge to wipe away the stray tears with his hand. "No, Jisung--go dry off," he juts his chin towards the antiseptic chamber, clenching his jaw to hold back on his emotions.

Taking Jisung's place at the sink, he strips off his gloves and gets to cleaning his arms and hands.

He knows he's close to spiraling, thinking too much about the implication of Jisung's actions, and his own by extension. He takes a deep breath.

Minho tells himself he hasn't even finished this procedure and he has seven more to complete, and that he needs to stop focusing on these things.

With harsh determination, Minho shuts off all trains of thought that don't relate to the details of the procedure.

He wants these over and done with, and the only way that's going to happen is if he stops getting so preoccupied.

Once they're both re-sterilised, they're ready to continue with the next part of the procedure - the Cerebrospinal Fluid transfusion.

It requires the drainage of the current fluid, genetically enhanced to aid the thought processes in the brain, while injecting new fluid as to not damage the brain organ. It's a delicate task, requires precise timing and quick hands, but it's primarily mechanised.

Once everything is put into place, Minho and Jisung only have to collect the drained fluid and monitor the injection site near the C1 and C2 vertebrae.

The drained csf is the last remnants of who Jinki was, the enhancements made to the fluid another example of the marriage between human biology and AI technology. The csf is partially technological, can be coded to increase compatibility with an operating centrum in a subject's body, among other things. If not replaced, the new centrum won't function correctly.

Like before, they work in silence. It's still unusual, and Minho still wishes Jisung were talking simply because the absence of his voice is unnerving.

But he thinks it's for the better, the more he focuses on the task at hand, the faster he works.

The csf transfusion is complete, and the subject is ready for a new centrum to be uploaded.

Minho and Jisung have completed their part, and Minho calls for the assisdroid to move the subject to their pod while they await re-uploading and the cleaning androids to reset the operating room.

The two of them wait in a separate room, stripping off their soiled scrubs and taking a seat before having to scrub in again.

Minho slumps into his chair with his eyes closed, exhaustion creeping in despite only *just* starting the set of procedures, and heaves a heavy sigh for the nth time in the last four hours.

It's not the physical tiredness, nor the mental drain of performing the procedures -- he feels emotionally wrung

out.

The image of Jisung comforting Jinki, who probably couldn't even register what Jisung was doing for him, making his efforts futile despite how kind and selfless they were, has seared itself behind his eyelids.

He wants to cry.

"Are you alright, Minho-ssi?" Comes Jisung's voice, soft and soothing.

A dismissive yes is forming on the tip of Minho's tongue, but he opens his eyes and turns to look at Jisung before he answers and the word melts away. Jisung is looking at him carefully, eyes scanning over his face and body, searching.

Sure, Jisung is unable to lie, but in a lot of ways it's hard for him to be lied *to*.

He's been programmed to understand and interpret human body language, and Jisung would know when he's given an answer that contradicts the truth.

Minho knows he's been... off. He thinks back to how distracted he'd been during the procedure, how he'd dismissed Jisung.

He thinks of himself now, curled up and completely shut off from Jisung who he is never anything but open with. Jisung knows Minho, probably better than anyone else, and he'd know if he were lying.

And it's not just about Jisung sensing a lie.

Minho realises that lying to Jisung would be unfair because he understands the implications of such things.

Minho doesn't want to risk hurting his--

"No, not really. I'm feeling a little off." He replies, still looking at Jisung.

He watches as Jisung's brows crease -- only for a second, as if second guessing his emoting -- and he nods.

"Have I done something incorrect?" He asks.

The question breaks something in Minho, scattering a hundred confused feelings throughout his heart and mind. He forces himself not to think about it, to not engage with it. Not right now.

"No, Jisung. you haven't done anything wrong."

In a lot of ways, that's a lie. So much of Jisung is *wrong*.

By all standards of the centrum program, he's malfunctioning. He's so malfunctioned, so far past the point of what is acceptable for the AI he is, that Minho would earn his name on doctor Song's list if anyone were to find out.

He's an experiment gone wrong, so horribly wrong, and he's been like this for *months*.

But none of that is Jisung's fault, he wasn't able to control any of it.

That's on Minho.

Chapter 5 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/138123754>): Movie Night

Summary:

Jisung stays the night at Minho's living quarters.

Notes:

and i'm back!! this chapter is where the story starts picking up!

this was supposed to be more angsty lol but i'm just so soft for centrum minsung !!!

i went back and forth a lot picking between howl's moving castle and the notebook, but in the end i decided to go with the former bc it just felt right for centrum minsung !!! (even if that means i may have had to make up some scenes for the sake of the dialogue, whoops)

thank you so so much for every single kudo and comment!! i hold them all very close to my heart and i truly truly am thankful <3 i was really hesitant to put centrum out on ao3 and to see so many people enjoying it is making me slowly work up the courage to change the anonymous status (also maybe post some new stories too hehe) \ (^•^)/

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#) (#chapter_5_endnotes).)

It takes them seven hours and twenty four minutes to complete the eight procedures.

There were complications that took up time; some of the subjects were so malfunctioned they required a more evasive version of the procedure while others needed additional restraining due to motor cortex glitches, among other issues.

But aside from all of that, Jisung noticed that as they went through the list of patients, Minho became slower in his work.

The first two subjects took the shortest amount of time, Minho working faster than Jisung had ever seen him, but once the third procedure began his movements became more calculated, sometimes even lethargic. He took more time between procedures to rest, usually just to slump over in a chair and let his head fall into his hands.

Jisung had concluded by the end of the fourth procedure that something was wrong.

He wasn't able to ascertain *what* exactly the problem was, but judging by the timing of his behaviour, Jisung felt confident to conclude that it was related to the procedures themselves.

At first, he thought perhaps he had done something wrong, but Minho had already assured him that was not the case.

Thinking of asking more than once had Jisung's negative response receptors heating up, and while he had no basis for why they would be activating he chose to trust what they were indicating.

He focused, instead, on assisting Minho as well as he could.

He followed procedure perfectly, didn't ask unnecessary questions, and was quick to scrub in. During the breaks in between he kept a short distance, offered to fetch water and snacks, and updated his clicker count until Minho asked him to stop, explaining that they would need to pause on that experiment for now.

He even found the time to do some light research as the breaks lengthened throughout the day.

The only other thing he did was he made sure to pet each subject's hair and tell them confirmations during the deletion process so that they could feel good.

It wasn't part of the procedure, wasn't something he was told to do, but he found himself unknowingly performing the actions.

When he realised what he was doing, he considered that his negative response receptors hadn't activated nor had Minho instructed him against what he had done so he didn't find any reason to stop.

It didn't make him feel good -- that is, it didn't activate his accomplishment centers -- when he did it, and when he initially became aware of it, he didn't understand why else he would do such a thing.

He just did it, and it didn't feel wrong to do so he kept doing it.

During one of the breaks, he analysed the action a little further.

He compared the seemingly subconscious action to that of touching his scar (which he now understands why he touches) and found that it had nothing to do with attraction or desire.

Then he thought of himself in place of the subjects.

His potential danger signal activated, and he understood.

He took a note of it, seeing as they were in the middle of the procedures when he'd come to the conclusion, and knew there would be time to bring up this new abnormality with Minho afterwards.

He had assumed Minho would want to discuss the procedures once they were complete, like the debrief they'd had when Jisung assisted for the first time all those months ago, but as they step into the break room, it's clear that's not going to happen.

Minho's footsteps are heavy, his movements sluggish as he strips off his mask and gloves and surgical gown.

Jisung copies his actions, completely silent except for the sound of the fabric moving, and continues to watch him carefully.

Minho makes his way over to the small kitchenette area, picks up a plastic cup on his way and stops at the sink. there's a deliberate pause, holding the cup under the faucet but his hand hovers over the tap handle.

Jisung sees he's shaking.

The plastic cup clatters into the sink, and Minho grips the edge of the counter. His whole body is trembling now, and Jisung recognises the sound of what he now knows is called a *sniffle*.

He pulls up the data file he'd been adding to throughout the day and finds the information on *what to do when someone is emotionally distressed*.

After a quick scan he finds what action is most appropriate for the situation, he walks up behind Minho and softly calls his name, which makes him jump.

Minho makes a sound of acknowledgement but doesn't speak; Jisung recognises it as a symptom, having noted that some people prefer not to talk in these circumstances.

"Let me hug you," Jisung says, "it will make you feel better."

Minho lets out a strained, "*what?*" sounding shocked. Jisung re-scans his data to ensure he hadn't made a mistake and reiterates.

"Hugging someone who is emotionally distressed is confirmed to help improve their state. You should be hugged."

He sees Minho's shoulders bunch up, the muscles tensing, and he can hear his uneven breathing.

His research indicated that some people are repulsed by physical contact in certain circumstances and Jisung does not want to hug Minho without permission, so he waits for him to make a decision.

It takes another moment of silence before Minho turns on his heels and then he's wrapping his arms around Jisung's waist, his face pressing into Jisung's shoulder.

The sound of his quiet crying is clearer and Jisung can feel his body trembling.

Jisung remains still, pulling up the diagrams he'd found that illustrates the appropriate reciprocation of this

specific type of physical comfort.

He places his arms around Minho's back, completing the embrace, and a moment after that he lifts one of his hands to pet the top of Minho's head.

He keeps his grip gentle, a hug is meant to be pain free and so too much pressure will hurt, but he notes that Minho's arms are wound tight and can feel how his hands have bunched up the fabric of Jisung's scrubs.

He doesn't know what that means.

Minho has never been this close to him before, has never been pressed up against his body, and for the first time Jisung can feel just how warm and solid he is.

The sensation is pleasant, like when he touches his scar.

He files away his comparison when he notices Minho has started murmuring words amidst his crying.

Listening closely, he hears him, "I'm sorry, I-I'm *sorry*, I didn't--" before he is cut off by a whimper.

Scanning through his data, he finds he should be providing verbal affirmation to reduce Minho's negative feelings.

"It's okay, Minho-ssi. you don't have to be sorry. It's okay." He borrows from the examples he added to his data, mixing them in with examples from Minho. "You did a good job."

A sharp inhale and a violent shudder from Minho have Jisung pausing and he waits to decide if he should continue. Minho is making an odd noise, one Jisung has never heard before and can only assume is part of the crying process, and is shaking his head against Jisung's chest.

Then he grits out on a sob, "*I killed* them, I-I-- Jisung, I'm so *sorry*."

Jisung pieces together the meaning behind Minho's words; recognises what *kill* means and that the *them* must be referring to the eight subjects from today.

He can't understand why Minho is directing his apologies to him.

He reframes the procedure of resetting a centrum subject as an act of killing and feels his potential danger signal activating.

He recalls another piece of information about his data, a section on prioritising the person experiencing emotional distress, and focuses back on Minho.

He does not know how to respond to what Minho had said, so he just repeats his words from before.

"Please stop saying I did a good job." Minho whispers a moment later, his voice breaks towards the end.

Jisung catalogues the amendment and then asks, "is there anything I can say instead that will help you?"

Minho breathes a sigh that rattles in his throat, "hugging is fine, just--I want to keep hugging you."

Almost seven minutes pass before Jisung feels Minho's grip loosen, and he takes that as a cue to loosen his own so he drops his arms but stays standing where he is.

Minho steps back, creates some space between them, and uses the collar of his scrub to wipe at his nose. "Thank you for hugging me, Jisung." He says, not looking up.

"You're welcome." Jisung replies.

"Where did you learn about... emotional distress?" He asks, eyes flickering to Jisung's face but still not meeting his eyes.

"I did research during our breaks."

Minho lets out a laugh that's mixed with a sob that tells Jisung it was not a reaction to something humorous.

"Of course you did." Minho mumbles, wiping at his eyes as fresh tears start to slip down his cheeks.

"Do you need another hug?" Jisung asks, opening his arms in preparation.

"No, no--thank you. I'm okay, I didn't mean to-- it's fine. Let me clean up and I'll take you to get ready for stasis." Minho shakes his head quickly.

Leaving Minho alone is not recommended by Jisung's data, and the thought of being put into stasis while Minho is still in this state lights up a weak signal from Jisung's negative response receptors.

"Minho-ssi, you still require comfort for your emotional distress."

"...What do you mean?"

"My research tells me that hugging someone while they cry is one aspect of helping a person during times of emotional distress. The proximity in time of the distressing situation and your emotional release indicate you're still experiencing negative emotions." He pauses in his explanation, deciding at the last second to re-word the last sentence of what he was saying so that he conveys his thoughts as accurately as he can;

"Please let me help you, I want you to feel better."

Minho just stares at him for a moment, his tear-streaked face still red and his eyes still watery but Jisung knows eye contact is good. He had been avoiding Jisung before, when he wasn't able to look at him.

"And what if putting you into stasis is what will make me feel better?" Minho eventually responds.

Nothing in Jisung's research indicates that action will be beneficial to Minho's emotional state, but Jisung trusts Minho's authority above all else.

"Then I will go into stasis." He nods his acknowledgement.

Minho frowns, his gaze shifting to behind Jisung and it seems as though he is thinking.

"That won't make me feel better." He says after a moment, his voice distant.

"I have other methods I can use from my research." Jisung offers.

Minho's eyes return to Jisung and his face breaks into a small, shy smile. "I have my own methods." He says. "Things I do to make myself feel better when I'm... emotionally distressed."

"Why do you say emotionally distressed like that?"

Minho blinks in surprise and his smile widens, his laugh more humour-oriented.

"It's an odd phrase for it. There are different ways of saying it, people use whatever word best describes their feelings, but emotionally distressed is not really one of them." He explains, sounding a little more like himself.

Jisung digests the information, then asks, "How would you describe your feelings?"

Minho bites his lip. "I'm not sure, sometimes it's hard to find the correct description." He starts, and then stops suddenly. He takes a deep breath.

"I think I'm just a little *sad*, Jisung."

Jisung nods. "What do you do when you're sad?" He has his research, but he's sure Minho's methods would be much better to use.

Another soft chuckle before Minho replies, "I watch anime."

Jisung nods again, making a note for his personal record, but doesn't say anything. He knows a little about anime and movies, understands the basics of what one is, but he's never experienced one.

Minho takes a step closer and speaks in a soft voice full of odd emotion.

"Do you want to watch a movie with me, Jisung?"

Despite understanding the focus needing to be on Minho, Jisung's accomplishment center lights up.

This one is strong, stronger than the ones he'd experienced whilst assisting Minho -- all of which had been muted, the signal adapting to be more appropriate considering the situation -- and it's *so* pleasant that Jisung smiles without realising.

The expression seems to surprise Minho, but it causes him to smile a little, too.

"Yes, I want to watch a movie with you." Jisung replies.

Jisung has never been in Minho's living quarters before. It's a small room, smaller than his office, and its central features include a bed, a desk and desk chair, a chest of drawers, and a mounted bookshelf.

The floors, walls, and the furniture are all similar shades of white which gives the room a tidy appearance, but upon closer inspection Jisung notes how the other small objects on Minho's desk (papers, notepads, pens, other small unidentifiable items) are unorganised and seemingly put down in haste.

The bookshelf has no obvious system of organisation, books shoved in at random, and even the blanket on the bed is crooked.

Jisung pays careful attention to each detail and adds the observations to his personal record.

"Um, did you want me to get you new clothes?" Minho asks, pausing with his hands in one of the drawers where he was choosing a change of clothes.

"No thank you, Minho-ssi," Jisung replies.

He has no problem with what he's wearing, loose cotton pants and a matching loose top which he wore a variation of everyday, and he doesn't understand why Minho wanted to change out of his own clothes.

He wanted to ask, but had decided to file away his questions for the duration of Minho's emotional distress -- his *sadness*.

It was difficult to ascertain how sad Minho was right now; he was no longer crying but his eyes were still red, and he still intends on watching a movie which is a method he uses to help with his sadness, so Jisung could only assume he was still in need of comfort.

He wanted to prioritise Minho, as his research indicated was proper procedure, and he knew asking questions wouldn't be proactive in his task.

"Okay." Minho nods, pulling out the clothes he wanted from the drawers. "Could you please look in the corner while I change?"

Jisung does so without comment, turning on his feet to stare at the white walls. His accomplishment center lights up when Minho murmurs *thank you*.

He wonders why Minho had framed his request like a question, but can't come up with his own answer.

Something to ask about later, perhaps.

A few moments later, Minho is telling Jisung he can turn around and Jisung takes a moment to register what Minho is wearing.

Usually, Minho wears dark slacks, a button up shirt, and is always wearing his white coat, but now he's wearing clothing quite similar to Jisung's; loose fitting pants and a large jumper.

Jisung knows Minho's usual attire is required, part of the professionalism of a doctor, but he had never considered what Minho would wear outside of his uniform. He looks less serious, the size of the clothing makes him look a little

smaller too.

It's different, but it doesn't seem to dampen his attraction to him.

He makes his comparison quickly, the differences striking him suddenly but once he's adjusted, he's ready to continue with whatever it is Minho wants him to do next.

It still must've taken him a noticeable amount of time, though, because Minho asks, "is everything okay?"

"Yes, I was just noting the change in your appearance." He replies.

Minho nods slowly. "Is it a bad change?"

Jisung considers the question, not quite sure how to delineate between a bad change and a good change. He doesn't want to ask, so he tries to figure it out by himself and does so by using his negative response receptors and accomplishment center as a frame of reference.

He also considers his research and its emphasis on confirmations.

"It's not a bad change. You look very nice, Minho-ssi."

Minho nods again, and a smile starts curving at his lips and it's enough to light up a confirmation signal.

Before the smile can form fully, Minho is turning around and walking to the bed where he pulls back the blankets and starts organising the pillows so they're stacked more on top of each other.

"You've never watched an anime before, right?" He asks as he works.

"That is correct." Jisung confirms. "But I know what an anime is." He adds.

"You do?" Minho pauses, straightens up to turn and look at Jisung. "You've done research on them?"

"I have. You've mentioned watching animes before, so I wanted to know what they were. The history of the moving picture is very interesting."

Minho's face goes pink for reasons unfathomable to Jisung, but he doesn't comment on it.

"I didn't know you'd done that. You should tell me about it later." He says, returning to organising the bedding. "I usually watch animes on a projector, it's easier because the walls are white and I don't have to fiddle with my laptop." He explains, stepping away from the bed, presumably happy with his set-up.

He moves to the desk next, where his laptop is, and he turns it on. "The bed is a little small, I know--" He's cut off when he's prompted to enter his password.

Jisung senses a dilemma, thinks about the dimensions of the bed and the space he and Minho take up.

"Your size is more suited to the bed, Minho-ssi. I can sit in the chair." Jisung tells him, thinking he'd solved a problem.

But Minho turns his head suddenly, looking at Jisung in confusion. "What?"

"I thought you were trying to decide where we would view the movie from. If you would like to use the chair, I can use the bed." Jisung's negative response receptor lights up, and he frowns.

Minho continues to look at Jisung with confusion for another moment before realisation settles over his features.

"Oh, Jisung, that's not what I meant. I was saying... well, I was thinking we'd both sit in the bed. It's small which means it might be a tight fit, but it's probably what's more comfortable, so..." He trails off, biting his lip. He's uncertain.

"Do you want me to sit in the bed with you, Minho-ssi?" He asks. He's been standing in the same spot for almost the entire time he's been in the room. He's not been told he can't move, but he's also uncertain of where to go, where to sit, where he'll be in the way.

He needs instruction, feels uncomfortable without direction, but he also wants to prioritise Minho's feelings.

Jisung could sense Minho had a preference for where he was to sit, but he needed confirmation.

"Do you want to sit in the bed with me?" Minho returns.

Jisung's initial response is *yes* and it takes him a moment to recognise it as a desire-response, wanting to be close to Minho.

He's started to frame his abnormal reactions and responses in such ways, and it's helping him understand his experiences better.

But his actual response is, "I want what you want." Because even outside of this specific circumstance, what Minho wants is always most important to Jisung.

"We'll sit on the bed together." Minho decides, turning back to his laptop to start clicking around his desktop.

Jisung processes Minho's words as *what he wants*, and a thought strikes him:

Minho wants to be close to Jisung.

It's a brief notion, it makes him recall data he's collected over the last few weeks on *attraction, arousal and desire*, but he does not dwell on it. He has other things he needs to focus on at this time.

"How do I sit on the bed?" Jisung asks, wanting to know for reference.

"Whatever way is most comfortable." Minho tells him, a small amount of amusement in his voice. "Generally, your back is resting on the pillows and your legs are laid flat."

Jisung follows what Minho had described, sits down close to the wall so there would be enough space for Minho next to him.

He sinks a little into the pillows which he's never experienced, but it's not unpleasant or uncomfortable. The

mattress is firmer but the sheets and blankets are soft.

He realises this is the first time he's sat in a bed.

There's a moment of silence, not particularly tense -- not to Jisung at least -- before Minhø speaks again.

"I usually watch an anime called *Howl's Moving Castle* when I'm, um, sad." He tells Jisung, walking across the short space to the wall opposite the bed. There, he flicks on a small device Jisung had noted but could not categorise before. He realises it's the projector when it's turned on, bright light flickering to life against the white wall.

"Do you know much about genres and cliches?" He asks, returning to the laptop on the desk where he clicks on the trackpad until the projected light turns black.

"I have a general overview, yes." Jisung answers, watching as Minhø picks up the laptop and finally makes his way towards the bed. He places it down on the small bedside table, pauses for a second, and then slowly slips into the space next to Jisung.

The bed seems much smaller with two people sitting in it, Minhø pressed against Jisung despite his efforts to leave as much space as possible. They haven't touched like this before, either, but it's similar to the hug; Minhø is warm and solid next to him.

Jisung feels his heart rate accelerate, his temperature rise just slightly.

"Is this okay?" Minhø asks, voice a whisper.

Jisung turns to look at him and sees his cheeks are pink again, his chest rising and falling a little quicker.

He seems to be mimicking Jisung's symptoms.

"Of course it is, Minhø-ssi." Jisung replies. "Why are you asking?"

"Because I want you to be comfortable." Minhø tells him, a note of urgency in his voice. "I want you to tell me if you're uncomfortable."

"I'm always comfortable with you, Minhø-ssi." Jisung hopes his tone and eye contact is enough to convey his sincerity, wanting to relieve Minhø of any stress he may be experiencing because of this.

Minhø exhales in a big whoosh. "Okay, that's--good." He opens a draw in the bedside table, pulls out a remote. "What was I saying?"

"You asked about my knowledge of genres and cliches."

"Yes! I wanted to tell you the movie is... very cliché. The genre is mostly fantasy. And it's a romance film. Kind of ridiculous, but it's good to watch when I'm sad, helps me... think about other things." Minhø sounds reserved now, almost shy. Jisung wonders why he feels the need to explain the reason behind watching this type of movie.

"I understand. If you enjoy it, Minhø-ssi, I'll enjoy it."

Minhø huffs out a quiet laugh before saying, "Okay, let's get started, then."

With the remote he turns off the lights in the room, making the projected image much brighter and easier to see, and then goes to fix the blankets, pulling them over their legs.

It makes Jisung feel much warmer, but it's not unpleasant.

Just as Minhø turns to his laptop, Jisung thinks of something he should ask. "Minhø-ssi, what is your level of sadness right now?"

Minhø pauses, but doesn't turn to look at Jisung. "Why are you asking?"

"I would like to have a point of reference, so I can monitor your emotional state throughout the night." Jisung explains.

He sees Minhø shaking his head, but he's not sure what that means in this instance.

"It's difficult to quantify or sum up, Jisungie--" The name slips out, the first time Minhø's used it in this context, and Jisung's accomplishment center lights up. "So I can't give you a particular level of sadness. I feel better than before, if that helps."

If Jisung considers Minhø's emotional state from before -- when he cried after the procedures -- as the highest level of sadness, then he can conclude that he's improved. Jisung's goal is to ensure Minhø does not regress into that level of sadness. "It does help, thank you."

Minhø gives a curt nod and then turns the movie on. He settles back into the pillows, shuffles around a little. A few moments later, while the opening scene is still playing, he loops his arm through Jisung's so they're not as squished together side by side and then after several beats pass, rests his head on Jisung's shoulder.

"Is this okay?" He asks softly.

It had activated Jisung's accomplishment center. "Yes, Minhø-ssi."

He hears a noise from Minhø, almost as if he were going to say something else, but it's cut off and he falls silent.

The opening screen transitions, and characters are introduced, so Jisung assumes Minhø had stopped talking so the movie could be watched. They watch silently for a while, and Jisung finds himself filing away *many* questions.

He understands the technical and theoretical aspects of movies. He knows there are characters and plots and dialogue, he knows about the general concept of sketching and animations, about cinematography and lighting and editing -- none of these things are confusing to him. Rather, he finds it helpful to have examples of these things he's only read about previously.

What he finds confusing are the actions of the characters, why the plot develops as it does. He can't seem to find

logic or reasoning behind each action or conversation, not in the ones given within the movie itself.

He tries to watch without the need for context, but he wishes he had a way to understand. He wants to know what a town is and what else resides there, why the Witch of the Waste would curse Sophie when it was against human morals, why Howl and Sophie are pressing their lips together in such a way and what exactly is happening when they perform such an action.

He pieces together little things, tries to frame his perspective through the lens of this being a romance film, but he doesn't quite understand romance very well either.

Half an hour into the movie, Minho whispers, "You haven't asked me any questions, is everything alright?" He keeps his head resting against Jisung's shoulder, still watching the film.

The outside of the titular castle looks bulky and heavy like it's about to break apart at any moment. Jisung notes the symbolism.

"Yes, everything is fine. Am I meant to ask questions?"

Minho chuckles softly, "No--well, I thought you'd have questions to ask. Do you?"

"I have many." He replies.

"Why aren't you asking them, Jisung?"

"Because in situations of emotional comfort, the person experiencing the distress is prioritised. I did not want to put my curiosity before your feelings."

He hears Minho swallow, it sounds almost choked, but when he speaks his voice appears normal, if a little muted. "You can ask me questions, I don't mind. I miss your voice."

Jisung files that away as another symptom.

He thinks of one of his many questions to ask. "What exactly is a date?" He doesn't understand the use of the word in this context but he noted that rumours said Howl wanted one from beautiful girls.

Minho hums thoughtfully, "In a romantic context a date is an event agreed upon by two or more people. A time and place is selected and the main goal is to spend time getting to know someone, and to also enjoy whatever activity they partake in."

"Is it okay to go on different dates with different people?"

"Um, it depends. If you date new people without ending your prior relationships then no. Not really." Minho tries to explain, forehead scrunching in concentration. "In Howl's case, his behaviour in the past was reckless and problematic. Um, his character grows throughout the movie and he realises that he only wants to date Sophie."

Jisung applies that to the events of the film, and finds that he understands things much better. "So the red door picnic was a date? For Sophie and Howl?" He asks, for clarification.

"It was, and so was the walking in the air at the beginning," Minho replies.

Jisung pauses to reassess the events of the scene. "That was not a date. Sophie did not agree," He contests.

"She didn't?" Minho sounds curious himself, prompting Jisung.

"She was scared and coerced. In a romantic context, there should be no threats or coercion. Is that correct?"

"You can recognise that?" Minho lifts his head from Jisung's shoulder, and the change makes Jisung look at him. Minho's expression is thoughtful, curious.

Jisung nods, "Yes, I can."

Minho nods, resumes his previous position. "Even if the threat was not coming from Howl himself, Sophie may not have been fully capable of consenting at that moment." He agrees, "You were correct, by the way. On both accounts. There should be no threats or coercion in romance."

Jisung adds, "And no deception." He glances at Minho to assess his reaction.

"That is also correct, Jisungie."

Jisung smiles when his accomplishment center lights up.

There's a pause and then, "You can ask me more questions."

Jisung chooses one at random, "Why did Howl call Sophie baby when they first met? She's a young adult, not an infant."

That earns a giggle from Minho and the sound lights up Jisung's accomplishment center.

"The word '*baby*' has different connotations depending on context and use," Minho explains, voice coloured with humour. "In a romantic context, baby can be used as a term of endearment, conveys affection. It means that someone is cute, generally. It also connotes the idea of taking care of someone, it implies a sense of... care, or protection."

"That's very interesting," Jisung comments, recording Minho's explanation carefully. He adds it to several data files.

"You think so?" Minho hums, shuffling around in his position. It makes Jisung aware that he himself has slid down a little on the bed, but instead of sitting up straighter he copies Minho and adjusts his position so it's more comfortable for the two of them sharing the space.

"Yes. I didn't realise the term was so versatile. Applying your definition, Howl could've been using the word for both reasons. He finds Sophie attractive, and he was attempting to encourage her to take his hand when she was scared from the soldiers."

“Very perceptive, Jisung,” Minho says, “Well done.”

The warm sensation of his accomplishment signal travels throughout Jisung’s body, distinct from the warmth conducted by the blankets he’s under.

“What other terms of endearment are there, Minho-ssi?” He asks, not prompted by the film but his own curiosity about the concept.

“There are many; love, or lovely, and dear are popular. Honey, sugar--food is popular, usually sweet foods because they imply the person receiving the affection is... well, sweet. Angel, sunshine, sweetheart are all common too. The list goes on, and people make them up as well.”

A replay of every time Minho has referred to Jisung as *sweetheart* echos in Jisung’s memory storages, and his accomplishment signal is so strong he feels his face heating up.

“How do you make one up?” His voice is quiet, unintentionally so. He feels distracted with the sensation he’s experiencing and the information he’s acquiring.

He feels Minho shrugging against him. “There are no rules. If a term or phrase implies affection between two or more people, then it can be used as a term of endearment. Names can be turned into them, although that doesn’t require romantic context. People shorten or lengthen names, called nicknames, which conveys familiarity.”

He wants to ask about the times Minho calls him ‘*Jisungie*’ and how he allows Jisung to call him ‘*Minho-ssi*’, but is prompted by the actions of the characters in the new scene to ask another question.

“Why do Howl and Sophie press their lips together like that?”

Minho coughs loudly, sitting up from his reclined position and turning away from Jisung slightly.

“Are you alright, Minho-ssi?” Jisung sits up too, considers placing a hand on Minho’s back as physical comfort, but Minho has composed himself before he could figure out if that was an appropriate response.

“Yeah --” He chokes out, coughs one more time and clears his throat, “Spit just went... down the wrong way.”

Jisung nods in acknowledgement and waits for Minho to speak. Sitting up like this, it’s easier to see his face, and Jisung can see the hesitation there. His negative response receptor heats up, waiting to decide if he has done something wrong.

“You want to know why Howl and Sophie kiss?” Minho clarifies after a moment.

A neutral response; the receptor cools down.

“Is that what that action is called?”

Minho nods slowly. “To kiss is to touch with the lips as a sign of... physical affection. That includes touching two pairs of lips together, but as you saw in the, um, movie, you can kiss a person’s cheek or nose... too.”

Jisung senses a level of discomfort in Minho’s voice, and he’s avoiding eye contact too. His negative response receptor is heating up again.

“Have I asked something inappropriate?”

“No, no,” Minho shakes his head, reaches out and rests his hand on Jisung’s arm-- something he associates with physical comfort. “No, it’s not inappropriate. It’s just a difficult thing to convey or explain. It’s... kissing is part of romantic relationships. It’s a way for people to express affection for another person.” He sounds more at ease.

“Howl and Sophie have a lot of affection for each other,” Jisung comments, recalling how often they kiss.

Minho chuckles, almost all tension disappearing from his body and Jisung’s negative response receptor cools down once again, to be replaced with a signal from his accomplishment center.

“They do,” Minho agrees. “Do you understand, or would you like me to explain some more to you?”

Jisung considers the question carefully. He thinks he understands what Minho has told him, but he is aware of the implied complexities of the concept as well. He would like to explore it more, but he feels that would be prioritising his curiosity *too* much. He decides he can research it himself.

“I understand, Minho-ssi,” Jisung tells him.

Minho nods and squeezes his arm gently. “Let’s get back to watching the movie, I think we’ve missed some things,” Minho says, settling back into the pillows and against Jisung’s side. “Do you want me to go back?”

“I want what you want,” Jisung repeats himself from earlier.

Minho seems to hesitate in his decision, but a moment later he sits up to rewind to a more familiar point in the story before returning to Jisung’s side, looping his arms through Jisung’s once more.

“If you have any more questions, you can ask them,” Minho whispers.

Jisung hums in acknowledgement, grateful that Minho had spoken so as to give him a choice. He has many questions, plenty of them relating to the movie’s content, but much more to do with the data he’s been collecting over the last few weeks and, more pertinently, the last few hours. He does not wish to share or burden them with Minho right now.

Some time later, when Jisung is attempting to understand the argument Howl and Sophie are having, Minho yawns.

Jisung recognises what that means.

“If you are tired, you should sleep, Minho-ssi. Rest is important for people undergoing emotional distress.”

Minho chuckles, soft and gentle and lethargic. “I might just close my eyes, but I’ll make sure to take you

to stasis before I sleep,” He mumbles, turning in towards Jisung a little more.

A few more minutes pass, Minhø curls in even closer to Jisung who feels his body relaxing further into the bed.

“I should tell you that I'm feeling much better,” Minhø says suddenly, voice a sweet whisper, “Thank you, so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Jisung returns, matching Minhø’s tone and volume. “I'm happy I could help.” He borrows the second phrase from his research, knowing it’s part of gratitudinal exchanges.

There’s a pause, and then Minhø takes a deep breath. “I... want to tell you that you did *very* well today,” He speaks quietly, but it’s loud enough for Jisung to hear.

His accomplishment center lights up, and he’s about to thank Minhø, but then he continues.

“You listened to me so wonderfully, did everything perfectly and I'm so proud.”

Jisung feels his breath hitch in his throat, something he’s never experienced, and his heart rate speeds up as his accomplishment center continues to send its signal, overlapping with the other one.

“You’re so good, you’re always so good for me Jisungie, and you make me happy, my best boy--”

“Minhø--” Jisung manages, cutting Minhø off but unable to continue himself. He's never received an influx of affirmations before, never had his accomplishment center send overlapping signals with increasing intensity.

He feels overwhelmed, the warmth spreading throughout his body something he’d never even thought of.

It’s overpowering, enough to have him incapable of speaking.

He never wants it to end.

But Minhø doesn’t continue after he had cut him off, instead he becomes very quiet and after a moment, when the signals start to slow down and decrease in intensity, Jisung realises the loudest sound in the room is his own breathing.

“Did you... do that on purpose?” Jisung asks, his words slow and uncertain, his centrum still re-calibrating after such intense activity from within his limbic.

“Did I hurt you?” Minhø replies, his face now almost hidden in Jisung’s shoulder. He's still speaking quietly, voice laced mainly with lethargy but also unmistakable fear.

“No, you didn’t,” Jisung rushes the words out, wanting to reassure Minhø. “You didn’t hurt me. It felt... it felt so good.”

“I wanted to... say thank you ‘nd...” His speech is even slower now, words slurring, and Jisung recognises it as a symptom of sleep.

“Thank you,” Jisung whispers, unsure if Minhø can still hear him.

“...I'm sorry.” The words are so faded, Jisung isn’t certain he heard correctly.

He doesn't try to ask for clarification, understanding that Minhø has fallen asleep. He doesn’t want to wake him because humans need sleep, especially after exerting physical and emotional energy, like Minhø has.

He wants to make sure he rests.

The movie is still playing, but Jisung can’t connect the points of the stories or recognise the new characters. He's not as curious about them anymore.

He can't do much while Minhø is asleep, so he decides to do what he usually does during the hours of the night.

He conducts his *research*.

Notes:

...can you guess what jisung's research could be?? i left some hints ^^

Chapter 6 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/138873256>): Overheating

Summary:

Jisung tries to make sense of his brain activity.

Notes:

Hello again! the response i've been getting is absolutely crazy, thank you so much flr reading!! i appreciate each and every one of you <3

i hope you enjoy this chapter, i may have went overboard with the technicality of centrum (again) but it’s detrimental to understand just how jisung is evolving and outgrowing his centrum coding!!

Minho is uncomfortably dragged out of sleep, sweating through his clothes with the heat of a furnace pressed against his back. His head feels stuffy and his eyes hurt from fatigue and he's so close to slipping back into unconsciousness, but it's so unbearably warm under the blankets that he *just* can't manage to ignore it.

He's whining softly to himself, wondering at what point did he put the heater on last night, when he remembers.

He remembers the procedures, the ache in his heart at the ugliness of what he was doing and the images of Jisung comforting each and every subject as they were deleted.

He remembers Jisung being there afterwards, to comfort him too.

He remembers gripping onto Jisung, scared that he would realise what he'd done and never want to be near Minho again.

He remembers asking Jisung to watch a *movie* of all things, and the unadulterated relief he felt when Jisung had agreed, and then the flash flood of guilt that followed as he realised how selfish he was being.

He remembers his own desperation to forget the heaviness in his heart; how easy it had been for him to get lost in the feeling of Jisung next to him in the bed, marvelling at his softness, his warmth.

He remembers how comfortable he felt, how he'd drifted off and not done anything about it because all he wanted was to stay where he was, next to Jisung.

And he remembers the words he had spoken in a barely there whisper, a rash attempt at giving Jisung the goodness he deserved for all Minho had put him through.

The sound of Jisung's stuttered breathing, Minho's names falling from his lips, echoes in Minho's mind.

Minho swallows harshly, tries to drag down the confusion and sadness and guilt back into his chest so it couldn't be heard as he whispers, "Jisung?"

There's a pause, or Minho thinks a *lag* might be a more fitting description, before Jisung replies.

"Yes, Minho-ssi?"

"What time is it?" Minho asks, quickly realising what the heat and the lagging meant for Jisung.

"It is 5:50 in the morning."

Minho bites back a curse.

The longest recommended time for a centrum subject to go without a session in stasis was 24 hours, and Jisung was ticking into 23.

That's why he's so hot, it's why he's slow; he's starting to overheat.

"We need to get you into a stasis chamber, come on," Minho says, and despite the note of urgency in his voice, he finds himself slowly stretching out his limbs, rolling onto his back and relishing in the sound of his back popping. He could probably still fall back asleep, he was starting to get used to the stuffy warmth.

He shuffles a little, and finally feels what could only be Jisung's arm trapped under his torso.

He blinks his eyes open, suddenly much more awake.

"Sorry, I didn't realise I had... moved in my sleep." He says awkwardly, unable to explain how exactly they fell into this position. The last thing he remembers is curling into Jisung's side, their arms loosely looped together.

He's sitting up now, the blanket pooling at his waist, letting the excess heat escape, and he turns to look at Jisung who hasn't moved at all.

He looks normal, except for the fact that he's lying on his side -- Minho isn't sure he's ever really seen Jisung lying down like this, not in such a relaxed position -- and the slightly glazed look in his eyes.

"You okay Jisungie?" He murmurs, voice low and bleary.

Without really thinking about it, Minho reaches forward to brush away Jisung's bangs and press the back of his hand to his forehead.

It's hotter than he expected, drawing his hand away quickly as the heat sears his skin. If Jisung were human, he'd be pretty much dead.

"I think I'm overheating." He replies, his own voice a stark contrast to Minho's. Aside from the lag, he sounds as normal as ever.

"I know, I shouldn't have fallen asleep, I'm sorry." Minho pulls the blanket back the rest of the way, swinging his feet down on the floor.

It's starting to set in, just how irresponsible he's been. "Next time, Jisung, you should wake me up."

He probably should've been more direct with it, sterner, make it absolutely clear that Jisung was to make sure he didn't let himself overheat, but he just didn't have the energy or alertness to.

He didn't even realise he'd said *next time*.

"Yes, Minho-ssi." Comes Jisung's acknowledgement, a few seconds later than usual.

Minho is pulling on a pair of shoes when another thought occurs to him.

He thinks of the words he had spoken just before he'd been pulled under the veil of sleep, the confirmations he gave, one after the other, in hopes of making Jisung feel good, to make up for all that had happened that day.

He realises he'd never done that before.

He can recall asking Jisung if he'd hurt him but, even mindful that he doesn't have the *time* to do this, he needs to know.

Minho walks back to the bed and sits on the edge, starts helping Jisung sit up and asks;

"Last night, just before I fell asleep, I gave you a number of confirmations," He doesn't even remember what exactly he'd said. "Right?"

"That's correct."

"I didn't really think before I gave them to you, I didn't properly consider what it might do, which I shouldn't have done, so I need you to tell me if it hurt you--maybe overloaded your limbic or anything similar?"

He speaks carefully, aware that Jisung isn't functioning in the best condition, and he wants him to understand what he's asking.

A bubble of horrified revulsion had steadily been floating up his chest and sits lodged in his throat, his fear of possibly hurting Jisung threatening to make it *pop*!

Jisung blinks slowly but Minho is startled to find that when their eyes meet, Jisung's gaze is sharp.

"No, Minho-ssi, it did not hurt. The sensations were very pleasant, I liked it a lot."

Minho felt there was slightly more to Jisung's answer than he understood, but he couldn't afford to sit around to detangle it properly.

"Okay, that's... that's a relief." Minho nods towards Jisung in acknowledgement, mind once again preoccupied with needing to get Jisung into stasis.

He's up and off the bed in a matter of seconds, at his desk to find the keys to the stasis room on this floor so they don't have to waste time going down to the main one.

Minho needs to help Jisung off the bed, knows that rushing him won't make things any better so they take the time they need to.

Jisung is quiet the entire way, and it's only just as Minho is prepping a chamber that he speaks, asking, "Are we going to talk about the procedures, Minho-ssi? Like we did after the first time I assisted?"

Half-distracted, Minho only nods a hasty yes before he realises Jisung is, in essence, asking if they *could*.

He can't really ask for things, can't make demands because it goes against his coding, his nature. But he can ask questions, make suggestions; there are loopholes. This is one of them.

"You want to have a debrief?" Minho checks, can only throw a glance over his shoulder for half a second as preoccupied as he is with getting the chamber ready.

He hadn't really thought about it, had spent most of last night actively trying to *not* think about the procedures, but he probably would've organised some sort of discussion.

It wouldn't be part of protocol, but he thinks it's something they need to do regardless.

"Yes, I think that would be beneficial," Jisung tells him.

That surprises Minho, but he tries not to let it keep him from the flow of work as he moves to help Jisung into the small chamber -- a modern day coffin; sleek, pristine and sterile, its glossy white casing hiding the plethora of wiring and hardware.

"Why would it be beneficial?" He asks, makes sure Jisung is settled, that he's situated correctly so that the stasis chamber will register his presence. There used to be a cable they plugged into an external port that connected their centrum to the stasis but the flap of skin was deemed unsightly and a new system was developed.

Now, the same motherboard accessed in order to wipe subjects are fitted with magnets, and once aligned correctly in the stasis chamber, a subject's centrum is linked with their chamber and their period of '*rest*' can begin.

"Because I have some abnormalities and conclusions to discuss with you." Jisung replies.

Minho had been ready to close the cover of the chamber but he freezes as the words settle in. His first instinct is to ask, to find out what Jisung had found. He wants to pull Jisung out of stasis and into his office so they can talk, so he can tell Minho what had happened yesterday.

But he can't do that.

He takes a deep breath.

"We'll discuss them as soon as you've had your rest." Minho tells him, relieved that his voice does not betray his panic.

"Okay, Minho-ssi." Jisung replies.

"Good boy." Minho slips out without realising, closing the top of the chamber and missing Jisung's gentle sigh.

As he activates the lock on the chamber and starts the session, he tries not to think of how he wouldn't have to wait eight hours if he hadn't been so foolish the night before.

Instead, he spends a few minutes wondering what he should do in the interim.

He could go back to sleep, he doesn't usually wake up for another hour, and the thought is tempting but he isn't so sure he could just go back to his room and slip into bed without a worry. He thinks about checking on the units from yesterday, knows several would be undergoing surgery today to repair physical malfunctions while the others would begin the re-uploading process.

Truthfully, though, he doesn't really have an interest in that -- not right now at least.

He might be asked to oversee their rehabilitation, but he'll wait to see if that's what he's assigned.

He knows he'll need to shower and probably grab something to eat.

Before he can talk himself into opting out of that option, he propels himself out of the room.

Still, forty-five minutes later, freshly-showered and munching through a pre-packaged fruit salad from the canteen on the floor below, Minh  finds himself back in the otherwise empty stasis room, sitting by Jisung's chamber to wait.

It's the afternoon and they're in Minh 's office.

Jisung sits on the examination table as he usually does and Minh  is sitting in his chair.

He had wanted to usher Jisung in here as soon as his session was done, but he followed proper procedure; he made sure Jisung did the short stretching routine recommended after time in stasis, and that Jisung changed his clothes.

"How are you feeling?" He asks, recalling Jisung's dazed eyes and flushed face from the morning. He had looked sick, frighteningly so.

He knows Jisung is better now, obviously -- or, as he should be thinking of it, he knows Jisung has cooled down, that his systems are functioning properly without the stress of constant processing. He still thinks it's good to ask.

"I feel much better," Jisung replies evenly. "The experience of overheating is not pleasant." He adds and it makes Minh  frown slightly.

His frown deepens slightly more when he notices Jisung mimicking him.

"I am really sorry, Jisung," Minh  apologises once more.

He tried not to let his guilt get the best of him while he waited; overheating happens, sometimes it happens well before a subject should require a stasis session, and in this case there was no risk of permanent damage.

He tried to tell himself that getting upset over it would be like getting upset when his laptop would overheat, its fan whirring distractingly and the bottom of the keyboard hot enough to threaten second degree burns.

But he quickly realised the analogy just didn't work. Not with Jisung.

"I promise it won't happen again." He adds, reassuring.

"I understand it was not intentional, Minh -ssi," Jisung nods. "You do not have to apologise. And I remember what you said earlier. I will wake you up next time."

Minh  only vaguely remembers himself, briefly tries to figure out when exactly he'd said something like that, but he's not able to spend much time doing so as Jisung speaks again;

"And how are you feeling?"

It takes Minh  a moment to realise Jisung probably isn't completing a social custom, asking after how someone is for politeness sake, but is actually referring to the night before and his emotional state.

"I'm... doing much better, thank you." Minh  replies.

Truthfully, he doesn't really know what he's feeling.

The crushing weight of what he was feeling last night has not exactly disappeared, but has been pushed aside by other things; the events of last night, waking up with Jisung in his bed, Jisung overheating, Jisung noticing new abnormalities.

But he's not lying either, not entirely.

Jisung had helped him a lot last night, had made the weight of his emotions feel not as heavy and it's the only reason he's not a brooding stormcloud today. He owes that to him.

"You did very well last night, Jisung." He tells him.

Jisung nods his acknowledgement and, much to Minh 's confusion, his cheeks colour just slightly.

It has him propelling them into the reason why they're here; "Alright, it's time for you to tell me about these abnormalities."

Jisung nods again but it takes a moment for him to speak, his eyes go distant for a moment and Minh  recognises that he's recalling something -- facts or memories, probably both in this instance.

"I'm not sure how to begin." He tells Minh .

That's... unusual, seeing as Jisung is pretty forthcoming about information he learns and things he experiences. Minh  reminds himself that yesterday was different, in a lot of ways, and that whatever Jisung needs to share with him may not be clear cut and easy for him to decipher.

"Start with the abnormalities, what they are." Minh  prompts, hoping it'll help Jisung in wording things.

"The first abnormality was unusual brain activity." He states clearly.

Minh  blinks, thinks that Jisung has experienced a lot of unusual brain activity and doesn't quite understand how this constitutes as something new.

"What kind of brain activity?"

"First, my potential danger signal activated yesterday, and I also experienced activity I am not familiar with, that I can't describe."

Minh  nods slowly, trying to make sure he has a careful grasp on what Jisung has told him. He tries not to be

alarmed, especially at the mention of Jisung's potential danger signal, and focuses on how to go about exploring this.

After a minute or two, he realises he needs more than what Jisung is saying, he needs to see it too, to help him understand.

"Okay," He says suddenly, swivelling his chair around to face his computer, powering it on.

"We're going to look at your brain scans, I need to see what happened." He explains, quickly typing in the password and trying not to get too impatient as things load.

Most of the monitoring that Minhø does of Jisung's centrum is through the auto-generated data reports; overviews of activity that would point out anything unusual or that required attention, but in-depth and thorough monitoring is always possible through the brain scans.

There is the live scan, which is projected onto the main screen of the program when it's opened on Minhø's laptop and shows Minhø what is happening in Jisung's centrum in real time.

What he needs now are the recordings of previous scans; they'll show him what Jisung had experienced yesterday, what he can't explain.

He pulls up yesterday's scan and decides against asking for a timestamp, wanting to see the changes throughout the day.

But just before he presses play, he thinks to ask, "Do you want to watch as well?"

Jisung has seen his scans before, but he's never watched one like this.

Minhø can't pinpoint why, but he feels that Jisung should see what's happening; that if he's experienced something he can't understand, then he deserves to see what it was, that he deserves to know what happened.

"I would like to, yes." Jisung replies.

Minhø motions for him to come up to the desk, and then realises there isn't an extra chair.

He stands and offers his own to Jisung, feeling awkward about having him stand while essentially watching his brain malfunction.

Once they were settled, Minhø leans forward and starts the recording, sped up to save time and make the changes easier to notice.

At first, there are no major abnormalities -- not by Jisung's standard, at least.

Minhø is used to the activity in Jisung's limbic by now. His accomplishment center lights up often and for longer periods with varying intensities.

For the first six hours it looks like any other Tuesday morning; nothing out of the ordinary.

As the procedures start, his limbic activity settles. His accomplishment signals adjusting to the situation, ensuring they don't distract a subject from their task.

For most subjects, it's a useful feature when in a situation where confirmations can be close together or frequent, but for Jisung it's almost essential considering how intense his signals can get.

He wouldn't be able to perform such tasks if his centrum did not recognise the need to prioritise function over reward.

As the hours ticks by in minutes, Minhø notes heightened activity in certain areas of the frontum and cerebrum regions, and the part of his centrum that allows connection and access to the internet also becomes active, which tells him Jisung was probably conducting his research.

Everything seems normal.

And then two regions of Jisung's centrum show activity, and Minhø feels his heart seize in his chest, his fingers clumsily coming down on the keyboard to pause the recording.

"Minhø-ssi?" Comes Jisung's inquiry as to why he had stopped the recording.

But Minhø doesn't reply, too distracted by the pounding of his heart and the frantic speed at which thoughts are running through his head.

In order to accurately reflect how humans function, centrum was designed to mimic the brain organ in as many ways as possible.

It made it easier to create the technology, using the existing structure of the human brain, and so many parts of the brain matter were either replaced or enhanced with the centrum hardware, and the remaining parts are controlled through manipulation of electromagnetic waves to assist with communication between the human biology and AI technology.

Amongst the active centrum tech in Jisung's brain, there are physical parts of the brain that have been refigured to be utilised for other functions (the limbic taking up much more space than the limbic system would in a human brain), or there are parts that have been redesigned for specialised functions specific to centrum subjects.

And so Minhø was only left with so many different explanations as he saw Jisung's amygdala fire up in red, activating his coded potential danger signal, followed by a flickering of activity in what correlates to his right supramarginal gyrus.

It's the first thing he thought of when he saw it, jumping to the most logical conclusion despite how impossible it should be, and Minhø is faced with his worst nightmare:

Jisung was experiencing fear and empathy.

“Minho-ssi?” Jisung repeats himself, and it’s enough to snap Minho out of it.

“Let’s keep watching,” Minho brushes off the implied question. “I’ll explain after we’ve watched more.”

He knows he’s going off his gut, and he can’t let himself get worked up based on a first impression. He needs to see some more, and then he and Jisung need to talk.

He presses play, swallows down his returning panic as he sees the still active amygdala and right supramarginal gyrus, and focuses on any other patterns he can discern throughout the day.

He notes that aside from that one spike of activity, the amygdala remains inactive, but there are fluctuations in the right supramarginal gyrus, which do not seem to increase -- a small mercy.

He stops the recording when the timestamps indicate the procedures have been completed.

“I think... I understand the abnormalities you noticed,” Minho says when he realises Jisung had turned slightly in the chair, waiting for him. “Or, I saw them.”

“Do you know what they mean, Minho-ssi?” Jisung asks.

Minho takes a deep breath and looks at Jisung. His face is impassive, it almost always is, but his neutrality is misleading, as it has been for a while.

It frightens Minho when he finds himself thinking that Jisung might not emote, at least not naturally, but it doesn’t mean he can’t *feel*.

It really is one of his worst nightmares; Jisung reaching a level of sentience where he could experience emotion that could hurt him.

Minho was able to manage his curiosity, originally he even convinced himself it wasn’t that big of a deal because Jisung was only learning, which only made him better at functioning the way he was meant to.

As his curiosity -- what began as him asking questions -- gave way to self-awareness and increasing independent thought, Minho started worrying, but he never thought it could become more than that.

At the very least, he was sure these *abnormalities* wouldn’t hurt Jisung. And maybe at that point, they couldn’t.

The development of attraction, of actively seeking rewards because they made him *feel good*, was a tipping point.

But it was contained; Jisung’s desire seemed to only extend to Minho, and he’s safe with Minho (hedoesntliketothinkaboutit) -- he wasn’t in a position to be taken advantage of, his enjoyment of his rewards couldn’t be twisted to hurt him. Not like they could be for a human.

That level of emotion, consisting primarily of operant conditioning, was safe enough.

But things like empathy and fear aren’t even meant to exist in a centrum subject, their coding shouldn’t even be allowed for those regions of the brain to be active in such a way.

“I have some thoughts about them, yes.” Minho replies, does his best to keep his voice even.

“I think it would be best if we start with your conclusions.” Jisung says after a moment, his version of prompting Minho to continue.

Minho can sense that Jisung is very much preoccupied with these abnormalities, that he clearly wants them to be discussed, and Minho agrees that they have to sort through what this means.

Minho just doesn’t know where to begin, doesn’t even know if what he’s thinking -- what he’s assumed -- is correct.

“Let’s start with the... potential danger signal, then.” Minho begins, words coming to him slowly as he tries to piece together how to approach this.

There is no testing for this, he doesn’t know how to find a definite conclusion, and that isn’t sitting well with him and it won’t sit well for Jisung either.

He thinks starting with the amygdala activity would be easiest, seeing as Jisung was at least able to identify it. “You understand its function, correct?” He asks.

Jisung nods.

The amygdala was re-coded to send a potential danger signal, the equivalent of a fight or flight response, if his centrum determined possible external damage; it was to make sure a subject would step off the road if it was at risk of being hit by a bus. It’s a beefed up reverse parking sensor meant to save the centrum program money on growing the human genes needed to create the bodies.

There was no reason for it to be active at any point during the procedures, unless his centrum wasn’t sensing potential *physical* damage.

He asks just to make sure, “Were you in any risk of external damage yesterday?”

“I wasn’t.” Jisung answers. He opens his mouth, as if to say something else, but he seems to pause, uncertain.

“Tell me, Jisung.” Minho encourages. Brain scans are all well and good, but when it comes to Jisung and his level of self-awareness, he’s the best source of decoding what he’s really experienced.

“I know what activated the potential danger signal, it wasn’t... I wasn’t able to come to a conclusion.” He says, and Minho makes a reassuring sound. “I can’t understand exactly why it activated the signal, but I do know what it was.”

Minho thinks he understands what Jisung might be saying; there was something that made the signal activate but it wasn’t physical, so he doesn’t understand how it managed to activate outside of the centrum coding. Minho feels the

same way.

"Can you tell me what it was that activated the signal?" He can tell Jisung is struggling with this, with not understanding, so he does his best to sound gentle and patient.

"I thought about being reset."

Minho feels his face harden into something serious as he considers Jisung's words, trying to grasp what exactly that implies.

Jisung knows what happens during a reset, Minho had explained it in detail before yesterday, and Minho knows it's not something Jisung wants.

He didn't know Jisung was actively apprehensive about it.

That's... complicated. Subjects aren't meant to *think* about being wiped, aren't meant to understand what it means for them because they aren't meant to have a sense of self, an idea of loss of what they are. They exist and there is no meaning attached to that existence.

But Jisung has had a sense of self for a long time, that's nothing new. Minho thinks that Jisung's potential danger signal activating in response to thinking about being wiped means two main things; Jisung has a sense of *self-preservation*, and his ability to conceptualise is increasing.

"Has this happened before? This type of activity?" Minho asks.

"It has, on one occasion before and one occasion after we completed the procedures."

Minho wants to know why Jisung hadn't told him about this before, why it never came up in any data report or in any conversations they've had, but he remembers that Jisung has a penchant for working on gaining knowledge until he had adequate *conclusions*.

He must've been waiting for a better sense of understanding before he told Minho. That's not acceptable, not for something like this, but now isn't the time to berate him.

"And it's been in response to being reset?" Minho clarifies.

"Yes. The first time, the activity was minimal and the signal did not activate. Yesterday was the first time it had activated in response to the stimulus." Jisung explains.

Minho frowns, thinks that the potential danger signal wasn't designed to respond to the stimulus Jisung had been exposed to.

His amygdala isn't able to function that way, not unless its developed the ability to do so on its own.

Wanting more insight into what stimulus was enough to activate the signal, Minho asks.

"Describe what happened leading up to when the response was activated, please."

Jisung nods, takes a moment to gather the memory, and then begins; "The first instance yesterday was during one of our breaks between the procedures. I was aware I was performing an action that I wasn't required to perform -- that is, petting the subjects and telling them confirmations. While trying to come to a conclusion about why I was performing this action, I considered the second half of the interaction, what the other subject may be experiencing, and that is how I came to the thought of being reset. That is when the signal activated.

"The second instance was after the procedures, while providing you comfort, you mentioned killing the subjects, and in order to understand what you were saying, I reframed the reset procedure as an act of killing. That is the second time the signal activated."

He finishes and the room lapses into silence.

Minho feels sick; Jisung's voice had remained flat and even, barely a hint of emotional inflection at what he was describing, and it sounded *wrong*. More than that, Jisung had admitted to equating being wiped to being *killed* -- a notion legally reserved for living organisms because AI, centrum subjects, aren't recognised as being alive.

Jisung has a sense of self, has self-preservation, and he understands that he can be killed.

Minho hadn't expected the onslaught of emotion that overcame him the night before, and so most of what he had said, especially while crying, was a result of being so overwhelmed. He doesn't recall his exact words, but he certainly didn't think anything he'd said could have these kinds of ramifications.

He's not sure why he would've said he killed them, not when he knows centrum subjects can't be killed; they're not alive.

He focuses his gaze when he realises he's seeing double, catches Jisung's eyes and sees the way he's waiting for Minho to continue their discussion.

He can't help but think that, perhaps, Jisung *can* be killed.

He's never thought of Jisung as being alive, not explicitly, and has certainly avoided thinking of him as a being that *feels*, but he can't ignore it anymore.

It would be wrong to, it would be ignorant, unfair.

This is new territory for Minho. He wasn't exactly well-versed in the ethical debates surrounding AI; the most he knows is that the centrum program is in the clear after proving the subjects weren't sentient or alive.

He doesn't know where to classify Jisung, not anymore. He's not human, definitely not, but he is more than just the coding from the program.

Minho clears his throat, hopes that he hasn't spent too long lost in his thoughts.

"Jisung, do you understand why this is an abnormality?" Minhø's interpretation of what this means is, obviously, very human and how Jisung has interpreted it will hopefully help Minhø in figuring out what this means for Jisung and where to go from here.

"My potential danger signal is not designed to activate to stimulus like the reset procedure."

It's a small relief, that Jisung has understood the abnormality from the perspective of his functioning.

"That is correct," Minhø nods. "I think I might have an idea of what that means, but I don't know how to explain it yet." He goes on to tell him, "I think we'd have to talk some more, but I think we should also discuss the other brain activity, too."

Despite the troublesome implications of self-preservation, the other activity Jisung has presented is just as complicated.

The way his right supramarginal gyrus had activated, Minhø had only seen in humans. that region is primarily motor and sensory functions, but the activity had nothing to do with physical movement or sensation.

He was experiencing *emotion*, and based on where the emotion was in his centrum, Minhø knew it was empathy.

Empathy... was never factored in when the centrum technology was created.

Centrum subjects can recognise different emotional reactions from humans, but they aren't able to understand them or experience them. Empathy requires formal operational intelligence; the ability to think of abstract, hypothetical, and future concepts.

Any other centrum subject wouldn't be able to achieve even just the *emulation* of empathy, like researching how to comfort someone who is upset, but showing physical activity in the brain, actual experience of empathy, shouldn't even be possible.

But this was Jisung he was dealing with, and he's already proven to be capable of much more than what even Minhø thought he could do.

And fear was scary, but empathy could be just as hurtful in other ways.

Minhø thinks of how Jisung had said he wanted to make the subjects feel good -- the subjects who were being wiped, the ones being *killed*.

"That's the activity I don't understand." Jisung tells him, "In the right supramarginal gyrus."

Minhø nods in acknowledgement and settles against the desk, half sitting on the edge, to give him a few more seconds to piece the words he needs together.

"Brains aren't meant to be aware of its own functioning. My brain won't know if something is working or something isn't, not how yours does. So when a region does something, especially something it's not meant to, you'll probably register it," He explains. "The region that was active yesterday was not meant to be active, not like how it was. It would be very difficult for you to come to an understanding of what happened."

Jisung likes to know, and it concerns him when he doesn't, so Minhø hopes he's able to make Jisung see it's okay that he doesn't understand.

"Do you know what happened, then, Minhø-ssi?" Jisung asks.

"I can guess based off your brain scan," Minhø replies, turning back to the computer and rewinds to a part of the recording where the region is active. "This here," He points, "Is the right supramarginal gyrus and it's meant to function within the somatosensory association cortex. But when it's active like *this*, it's telling me you're experiencing empathy."

"Empathy," Jisung parrots. "I've come across that word in some of my research, but I'm not sure what it means."

"To... have empathy, or to empathise, is to understand and relate to other's emotions and feelings."

"I'm not meant to do that?" Jisung asks, as genuine as ever, and Minhø is not imagining the pain in his heart.

"No, you're not. Centrum subjects aren't meant to have empathy because they're not meant to have feelings, Jisung," Minhø says gently.

He's worried about upsetting Jisung.

He's not even sure if they're at that stage yet, but he wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

"When you mean feelings, do you mean emotions? Because I do feel things, Minhø-ssi."

Minhø surprises himself and chuckles, mostly in relief at the familiarity of Jisung's unintentional humour. He sounds as if Minhø had been accusing him of not being able to feel, as if Minhø had missed the obvious, and his seriousness just makes it sound *funny*.

"Yes, I mean *emotions* -- chemical, hormonal things that aren't really meant to be experienced by centrum subjects." Minhø tries to return to a more serious tone, but he's still smiling a little, overly grateful for the break in tension.

"I disagree," Jisung says confidently.

"You--what?" Minhø blinks. Jisung repeats himself.

"Please explain."

"You said centrum subjects aren't really meant to experience emotions, that we can't have emotions. But our limbic design and accomplishment center function is based on the neurotransmission of endorphins in the human brain." He doesn't sound necessarily defensive, nor upset. He's just *talking*, making his point the same way you'd read

information from a textbook.

Minho doesn't know what to say, grapples for words until he finally asks, "Are you saying I'm wrong?"

"No, Minho-ssi," Jisung is quick to reply. "But from my understanding, the centrum program doesn't want subjects to experience emotion. If that was their goal, then mimicking the emotional processes of the human brain might have been counterproductive."

Minho is starting to understand Jisung's perspective, and the more he thinks about it the more he has to agree, but he still doesn't know where exactly this is coming from.

"Can you experience emotions, Jisung?"

"You told me I can."

Minho bites down his smile, recognises the bratty streak that sometimes shows itself in Jisung. "Okay, what emotions do you experience then? Tell me."

Jisung takes a moment to think and Minho is hit with the thought that he must've spent a lot of time on this topic. He wonders when it started.

"I can feel good," He says, "When my accomplishment center is active, when you are near or when you touch me, when I touch my scar; all of those things make me feel good."

Minho doesn't dwell too much on the examples Jisung provided and instead takes a more disputative approach. "And what if I say feeling good is a state of being, not necessarily an emotion?"

It's a solid counter, and he'll be able to back it up, but mostly Minho just wants to test Jisung. He wants to see how far his awareness and conceptualisation can go, especially with something like this.

He wants to know what he *thinks* about this.

"Feeling good is associated with positive emotions, according to my research. So, I can say that when my accomplishment center is active, then I am happy."

"That's a good point," Minho says, because it is. He won't dispute that. "Well done."

"Thank you Minho-ssi," Jisung nods, cheeks dusted pink. Minho senses a pause, so he waits before he speaks and a few seconds later Jisung is talking quite quickly, "Do you not think I can feel emotion? Because I thought we had agreed that I experience attraction and desire, that I can feel those things, because I do."

That takes Minho aback, not realising that he may have been contradicting himself in his explanation, and that he had dismissed Jisung in the process. He wonders what kind of reaction that may have created in his centrum, if it's what prompted him to voice his disagreement.

"For a long time, Jisung," Minho starts, finds he can't quite hide the sad note in his voice and hopes Jisung won't notice it, "I've tried not to consider what you experience as emotion. For the most part, I've been able to explain these abnormalities within the functions of your centrum -- it's all possible within the coding, so I decided it's not *authentic*. It... helped me come to terms with your changes. But now, I think I have to admit that you experiencing empathy means that, yes, you can experience emotion."

"You agree that I feel emotion like how you do?" Jisung iterates.

Minho pauses because he doesn't know if it's accurate to say Jisung feels things like a human does, and Jisung takes his hesitation as a chance to add; "You experience emotions, correct? You feel things... like happiness? attraction? arousal?"

"Yes," Minho grits out, once again tries not to think too much about the examples -- or at least just tries to be grateful they're relatively positive things. "I feel those things."

"So we're the same."

If he were human, maybe Jisung would've uptalked, made his statement sound like a question, but instead it's declarative, final.

"In some ways," Minho adds. He doesn't feel entirely comfortable with that notion, although he doesn't know why.

There's something about Jisung's insistence, the way he's harped on this notion in such a way.

Minho still doesn't understand why it seems so important to him.

He doesn't get to ask before Jisung is speaking. "I don't think I understand my experience of empathy, though." He sounds more blunt now, almost as if he's disappointed with this.

Minho wants to talk more about Jisung's preoccupation with their agreement on his emotion, but he can't find it in himself to deny Jisung knowledge of himself. "Maybe I can help you walk through it. Tell me what happened, what led up to the brain activity, and we'll discuss it."

Jisung nods and takes a few seconds to gather his memories. "I knew I was performing this action, like I explained previously, but I did not know why. It didn't activate my accomplishment center, nor my negative response signal. I knew it was neither good or bad, and that you had not told me to stop. I began trying to think of what might be causing this action, and I came to my conclusion when I thought about being reset. That was when my potential danger signal activated as well as when I noted the unusual brain activity."

He stops, looks at Minho to guide them through this. "Based off that, I think it was probably the thought of being in the subjects' place that caused the empathetic activity. You were relating to what they may have been feeling, which

is how empathy works.”

“I'm not sure what I was feeling.” A crease forms between Jisung's brows when he says this and Minho stops himself from reaching out to smooth it away. “Aside from the potential danger signal.”

Minho had concluded that the activation of that signal means fear; everything about the situation tells Minho that Jisung was having a fear reaction to potentially being wiped.

Jisung hadn't interpreted it the same way, not yet, and now Minho was faced with having to guide him through what he experienced.

But he doesn't want to do that, doesn't want to leave a trail of breadcrumbs for Jisung -- not with something like this. He wants Jisung's understanding to be his own.

“Can you... tell me why you were giving the subject's confirmations and petting their hair?” He already knows the answer, but he wants to prompt Jisung as gently as he can, give him room to explore his own thoughts about this.

“Because I wanted them to feel good. When I receive confirmations and have my hair pet, I feel good, and I felt it was logical to assume it would be the same for them.”

Minho isn't sure that would be true, not when Jisung is such an outlier. Other subjects would not feel *as good* when they received confirmations, and it's highly unlikely their accomplishment center would react to their hair being pet like Jisung does.

But Jisung doesn't know that because his empathy and perception is still new, would still need developing.

But the idea that he wanted to make them feel good in the first place was already a big jump; applying his own experience to the action was just the icing on top.

“Why did you want them to feel good?”

Jisung hesitates, he's frowning now too, and it's probably the most dynamic expression Minho's seen him perform.

“Because I would not enjoy being reset. When I thought about being in their place, my potential danger signal activated and it--” He cuts himself off and Minho is straightening up, standing at attention as he feels a shift in the room.

“I do not think I would feel good if I was to be reset, I think it would make me feel bad. I don't like feeling bad, so I wanted to help the subjects not feel bad. I would want someone to do that for me, so I did it to them.”

The words cut at Minho's heart and he feels his eyes burn with the beginnings of tears, but he refuses to let them fall.

“That's empathy, Jisung,” He says quietly, almost whispering the words.

“I don't want to be reset, Minho-ssi,” Jisung says suddenly.

“You're not going to be reset,” Minho replies automatically. “Why would you say that?”

“I'm thinking about it, and I don't want it to happen,” He's shaking his head, his voice small and muted, and Minho feels panic rising in his chest too fast for him to suppress.

“It's not going to happen,” Minho's voice sounds distant to his own ears, stuck in his head as he tries to decipher what's going on.

Jisung has never behaved in such a withdrawn way before, he doesn't understand why he'd be talking about being wiped and why he sounds like-- *that*.

“But it's always a possibility,” Jisung stops shaking his head, but his eyes are downcast.

“I don't want to be *killed*,” He adds in that same voice.

Something strikes Minho then, the pieces falling into place at the same time despite the whole picture being right in front of his face.

His hand comes down on the keyboard; a couple of keystrokes later and Jisung's live scan is onscreen.

His amygdala is lit up with the potential damage signal, more intense than it was yesterday.

He feels at risk.

“I don't want to be killed,” He repeats, seemingly to himself.

Minho is frozen, staring at the screen and scrambling for *something--and* in the absence of his emotional response, he picks up one from Jisung.

He realises that this is the closest Jisung has ever sounded to being scared; a small, muted whisper. His potential danger signal would not inhibit his speech patterns, he should be speaking normally.

He's choosing not to.

He's expressing himself.

Carefully, Minho unlocks his body and slides down to his knees so he could see Jisung's face better. He looks up and meets Jisung's unblinking, dazed eyes and tries his best to swallow down his fear.

Minho tentatively reaches for Jisung's hands to hold in his own. “Jisung, tell me what's happening.” He wants to distract Jisung, try and remove his thoughts from what he's experiencing, rationalise things instead.

“My potential danger signal is active,” Jisung replies in that same voice. “Is this the idea you were not able to explain?”

“I think so,” Minho murmurs, but they're so close Jisung is still able to hear him. Then, he speaks louder, hopes to get through to Jisung, “Listen, you're not going to be reset, you're not in any danger of it happening. I won't let it

happen, you can stop thinking about it.”

“I understand,” Jisung sounds breathless, “But my signal is still active. I don't know why.”

“Because you keep thinking about it.” Minho squeezes Jisung's hands, doesn't think when he says, “Stop thinking about it.”

Jisung stills, he blinks and his eyes become clearer. Minho isn't sure what's happened until his gaze flickers up to his computer screen, and he sees the signal dying down, becoming dormant.

“Jisung...” Minho hesitates, not sure what to say, how to ask, “You stopped thinking about it?”

“Yes,” He replies, voice back it's normal cadence.

“Why?” He feels like he already knows, but he wants to be sure.

“Because you told me to.”

Minho bites his lip and nods, slowly realising the implication of that.

“Did I do something wrong, Minho-ssi?” Jisung's hands shift slightly in Minho's grip.

Minho drops them, stands up and steps away. Jisung looks at him carefully.

“No, Jisung,” Minho shakes his head.

They'll need to talk more later, but they both need a break, Minho decides. He doesn't want to overwhelm Jisung, and he needs to think more about what *he's* feeling too.

But for now, he gives in to himself as he steps forward and gently cards his fingers through Jisung's hair; “You did very well, Jisungie,” He says, not sure if he's successful this time in hiding the sweetness that so often threatens his voice.

When he sees Jisung's pupils dilate and his cheeks dust pink, Minho decides it's something he can worry about later.

Chapter 7 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/139746091>): **New Phase**

Summary:

Jisung shares with Minho his top secret findings.

Notes:

It's finally here!!! i tried my best to show their dynamic and how it set the tone for this chapter, so sorry this took too long!! i hope you enjoy this chapter as much as i did and pls pls let me know your thoughts <33

happy reading!

Jisung has learnt a lot over the last two weeks.

He's been doing research, much more than he usually does, in search for answers to his seemingly endless questions.

He's curious about so much, and he wants to know all of it, if he can. He found himself preoccupied with smaller things for a long time; he liked researching the meanings of words and the history behind them, and then he moved onto researching things like sleep and why humans need it, and the internet and how it's used.

Researching things about himself is the most interesting to him. He likes to know how he works, likes to understand the things he's experiencing.

That's why he enjoyed learning about desire and attraction so much.

Learning about fear was hard, he's still not sure he's content with his current level of knowledge, and empathy was harder. Minho told him that the difficulty might arise from the fact that Jisung may be experiencing these things, but not like humans do. There isn't any literature on the subject, so getting an understanding might not be possible.

Minho promised to work on ways to help Jisung better come to terms with these abnormalities, meaning he would not need to continue his research if it's not giving him answers.

They agreed to monitor the development of these abnormalities while Minho figured out how to understand them better. It allowed them to resume their normal activities and routine, and for Jisung to not feel as though he had not completed a task incorrectly.

It also gave Jisung the freedom to pick up his research on other things he was interested in; he explored movies and anime after watching *Howl's Moving Castle* with Minho, learnt about the history of cinema, the development of the moving picture, as well as became more familiar with the contents of movies; tropes, symbolism, social and cultural impact. It was a dense topic, one he's still learning about, but one he enjoys nonetheless. He even learnt about the

creation of sketches and the old way movies were filmed and processed.

He began research on the institution of education after Minho explained to him that most people learn things in school, and he finds the topic intriguing as well.

He intends on looking into people called *musicians* soon too, after coming across music sheets and instruments during other research. On his list are Day6 and Woodz. Minho said he was looking forward to what Jisung found because he is also interested in music himself.

But all the things he's researched, has started researching and plans on researching have not been his main priority over the last few weeks. He turns to those topics when he feels he's made enough progress on his main project for one night, decides he wants to look into something different before he continues the next evening with what's most important to him.

He's taken time with this specific interest of his, not wanting to rush himself or risk trusting incorrect data. He wants his conclusions about this to be accurate.

Because, of all the things he's researched and will go on to research, of all the concepts, ideas, and theories he's exposed himself to, there's one thing he finds himself interested and invested in above all else.

And that's Minho himself.

It wasn't always like this.

Jisung can recall memories from when he first came to consciousness; he remembers seeing Minho's face first, attentive as he checked for a response, and then his voice guiding him through his first physical -- checking the function and movement of his limbs and the sync to his centrum. But back then, Minho was just a face and a voice; he was just Doctor Lee.

But over time, as they worked together and Jisung became more familiar with him, *Doctor Lee* became *Minho-ssi* and he was no longer just another face or voice. He didn't fade into the catalogue of other faces, of other people and subjects, instead he became someone Jisung looked out for, tried to find amongst a group.

He still does not understand his attachment to Minho, but he knows it feels good so he's not so concerned about knowing exactly *why* his attraction exists, why it only extends to Minho. His research indicates that it's common for people to not know why they find certain people attractive, so he thinks it's probably a normal symptom.

But the attachment developed, and Jisung remained mostly unaware of it. He didn't have the self-awareness, the intelligence and independent thought he has now that would've allowed him to recognise what was happening.

By the time Jisung researched drooling and first came across the terminology to describe his experiences, he had everything else he needed to understand.

And from there, his interest in Minho only increased.

After the initial findings on drooling and the subsequent concepts he found relevant to the topic, he continued his research because he knew there was much more to attraction and desire than what he found on that first night.

It indeed proved to be a vast topic with many intricacies that eluded him, but one of the most monumental findings he came to was that attraction can be reciprocated.

That's when he started paying more attention to Minho; what he said, what he did, his facial expressions and body language, his physical reaction to things, his emotional state. He observed as much as he could, applied his findings to ensure he would come to the correct answer.

The night they watched the movie, when Minho had given Jisung the overlap of confirmations, brought him to another interesting, and thoroughly bewildering, intersecting topic of attraction.

He learnt why Minho does not appreciate his use of the word 'arousal'.

(He maintains that he uses the word correctly within context, but understands that words have strong connotations for humans and wants to respect their customs. Well, Minho's customs, at least.)

It's the days after they debriefed the procedures, when they found out Jisung could experience fear and empathy, that Jisung finally gathered the rest of the data he wanted.

He felt he had enough research and empirical evidence to present his findings to Minho.

"Good morning, Minho-ssi." Jisung greets as Minho shuffles into his office. He returns the greeting which is cut off when he's unable to suppress his yawn.

"Sorry, g'morning." He tries again, settling into his chair mostly haphazardly, only careful not to jostle the hand holding his cup of tea too much. Jisung had asked why Minho doesn't drink coffee, considering it has more caffeine than tea does which is the primary reason humans consume the beverage, and Minho had just told him coffee doesn't taste as nice.

When Jisung asked why Minho doesn't simply get more sleep, Minho chuckled and said he would work on it. Jisung doesn't think he's been working on it as much as he should.

He's been staying up to work on Jisung's new abnormalities, which really isn't anything new. The self imposed working hours certainly aren't drastic by Minhø's standards -- he's done this kind of thing before. It's just something Jisung is aware of. Minhø yawned twenty-four times yesterday.

"We have to do a physical today," Minhø tells him, clicking through folders on his computer. His voice becomes a little less sleepy as he keeps talking, "It was actually due yesterday but I forgot about it."

"Is that because of your decrease in sleep?" Jisung asks, curious of the cause of his forgetfulness. Minhø usually stays on top of such things like routine physicals.

"It could be, but don't worry about it, Jisung. I'm happy to report I got one more hour of sleep last night than I did the night before."

Minhø is grinning when he turns around to face Jisung, his eyes crinkling at the corners sweetly. Jisung's accomplishment center activates at the sight.

"That's good progress, Minhø-ssi," Jisung nods, making sure to input the data in his records. "But if you had more sleep, why are you presenting just as many symptoms of tiredness?"

Minhø sighs, turns his chair so he's able to pick up his drink and takes a sip. "There's this thing called sleep debt, the cumulative effect of not getting enough sleep, which you can research later on if you want. You're very lucky you'll never experience it." He's smiling as he talks, indicating to Jisung that he's in a fairly good mood; jovial as opposed to the crankiness and agitation that Minhø can sometimes display when he's tired.

"I'm ready to start the physical, Jisung, so you can strip out of your clothes." Minhø says, starting to get out of his chair, and Jisung realises there had been an odd pause as he'd been analysing Minhø's mood.

"Could I present some findings to you before you perform the physical?" Jisung asks, stopping Minhø in his tracks.

Minhø's face morphs into a gentle expression of confusion, sitting back down in his chair slowly. "I didn't know you had findings to present to me. Did I give you something to research yesterday? Or is this your own research?" Jisung doesn't share *all* his research with Minhø, he does far too much of it now, so Minhø doesn't always know when he's looking into new things or what those things are.

"This is my own research, Minhø-ssi. I've been working on it for several weeks." Jisung replies.

"Several weeks? That's a long time," Minhø looks surprised, his eyes widening slightly. "What's it about?"

"It's about you."

Minhø's surprise deepens, a flurry of expressions pass over his face too fast for Jisung to definitively name, but the overall effect is something like bemusement.

"Me?" He repeats, as if he's making sure he did not mishear.

"Yes, Minhø-ssi." Jisung confirms.

There's a few seconds of silence where Minhø looks at Jisung with his mouth open before he shuts it, his teeth clacking together loudly.

"Okay, I'm listening." He says after a moment, settling in his chair.

Jisung pulls up the relevant data reports and prepares what he's going to say. He's thought a lot about the best way to deliver his conclusion, took careful consideration of the fact that humans react to information differently depending on how it's delivered.

He also knows he wants a specific outcome himself, he wants to ensure he does what he can to have that outcome.

"First, I want to emphasise that I have spent a lot of time on this research; not just research on the internet, but also in collating data and other empirical evidence that supports my conclusion. I know that false assertions in this context are not taken lightly, so I want you to know I've made sure to be thorough."

"I don't doubt your scholarship, Jisung," Minhø says, gesturing a little frantically. "Please, keep going."

"While I've done a lot of reading on the matter, I've also made sure to pay attention to physical and other quantitative data. Unfortunately, I can't access things like heart rates and brain scans, but I've noted things like an increase in respiration which indicate an accelerated heart beat, as well as times when you blush.

"I've also generated data on symptoms like smiling, laughter, dilation of pupils, verbal cues, and frequency and duration of physical contact. While I don't have much comparative data, I think those findings are still valid and strongly support my conclusions. I've plotted this data temporally to track changes and discern patterns, and found that the increases of behaviour you have displayed are congruent with my own, which is consistent with the findings in the literature."

Jisung had done a *lot* of research, and he understands that the next part of his explanation is significant. He wants to incorporate aspects of social norms, wants to reflect experiences Minhø may have had in the past, and prove that he's well-versed in these interactions, that he knows what this all means.

He stands from the examination table and walks towards Minhø. He's careful to pay attention to physical and facial cues, understands the importance of reciprocity, and while he acknowledges Minhø's general expression of confusion, he shows no evidence of opposing Jisung's advance.

So, as graceful as he always is, Jisung sits down in Minhø's lap.

He researched different kinds of physical closeness, studied different positions and knows what is considered most preferable. He took into consideration the fact that Minhø was already sitting down and that he wanted to be able to look at Minhø's face easily.

He chooses to *straddle* Minhø, bending his legs to accommodate the size of the chair and planting each knee on either side of Minhø's thighs.

His first impression is that it's a surprisingly comfortable position to sit in, even in such a tight space. Minhø is warm, juxtaposing the cool air of the room, and he's the perfect mixture of soft and solid.

Jisung's accomplishment center activates.

But the signal does not last long, not when he registers Minhø's expression.

His lips are parted, his gaze is fixed on Jisung and his brows are furrowed deeply. Jisung can't quite categorise the expression, not the name of it, but he does not think it's positive.

Before he can ask, Minhø is speaking, soft and quiet, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting in your lap," Jisung replies. "It's part of my findings." He thought Minhø would like it, but he can feel his negative response signal starting to activate. "Have I done something wrong, Minhø-ssi? Should I sit back on the examination table?" He didn't want to make Minhø uncomfortable, that's not how he wanted to do this.

"You haven't--" Minhø starts but cuts himself off, closing his eyes and tilting his head back. Jisung looks down and sees his hands are clenched into fists on top of the arm rests.

"I don't understand what you're doing, Jisung. Please tell me your conclusion."

Minhø gave him a neutral answer and his signal subsides but remains undecided. He tries to concentrate on his next words, decides to quieten his voice; partly because they're closer now, but aside from that he's also concerned that he's made some sort of mistake, feels slightly uncertain.

But Minhø has asked him for his conclusion, so Jisung tells him;

"You're attracted to me."

Minhø jolts, so hard that Jisung jolts too and the only thing that prevents him from falling off the chair is the combination of gripping onto Minhø's shoulders, and Minhø's hands catching him around his hips. They freeze like that, looking at each other with wide eyes.

Minhø is the one to break the silence, although his voice is nothing more than a breathy whisper, "Jisung, what do you mean?"

Jisung swallows, notes the slight excess of saliva in his mouth, and replies.

"My research and my findings tell me that you are attracted to me. We're the same, Minhø-ssi."

"The... *same*?" Minhø echoes softly.

"Yes, I'm attracted to you too. It's reciprocal, and I found out what reciprocal attraction can mean."

"You've--wait, what?" Minhø sounds a little more focused, eyes blinking clearer and his grip on Jisung's hips tightening for just a second. "I-I don't think I understand."

Jisung remembers the number of articles on the topic of physical interaction and their meanings, and one particular concept of *actions speaking louder than words* -- which deals with the idea that actions can portray more powerful messages than correlating words, that meaning can be conveyed and implied through established contextual information.

He also knows that a kiss is a form of physical affection.

Like with the sitting, Jisung refers to his data; how one initiates a kiss, the position one should assume, the pressure that should be applied, etc. and he focuses it all into his next actions, sliding his hands closer towards Minhø's neck and leaning forward, aiming to align his lips with Minhø's. When he feels he's at the appropriate distance, he closes his eyes.

"Jisung, stop."

Jisung stops.

For a few seconds, all Jisung can hear is Minhø's short, quick breaths and they're so close to each other that he can feel each puff of air against his skin.

"You haven't done anything wrong," Minhø starts slowly, deactivating Jisung's undecided negative response signal, "But I want you to stand up."

Jisung does as he's told, but senses a contradiction between what Minhø is saying and what he means. If Jisung hadn't done anything wrong, why didn't they kiss? And if he *had* done something wrong, why hadn't Minhø said so?

At the sound of movement, Jisung opens his eyes and sees Minhø standing too, backing up to almost the other side of the room. His cheeks are red and his eyes keep moving around, seeming to avoid looking at Jisung. That's not a good sign.

"We need to... rewind here," Minhø says.

"Do you want me to start again, Minhø-ssi?" Jisung asks, not entirely sure what he means by 'rewind'.

"I'm just going to ask some questions, is that okay?" Minhø sounds uncertain himself, his voice oddly pitched and his eyes mostly downcast.

"Of course."

Minho takes a deep breath, exhales, and then takes another deep breath. "You think I'm attracted to you, is that right?"

"That is my conclusion." Jisung nods even though Minho isn't looking at him.

"And you think this because... physiological evidence?"

"My conclusion is based on similar patterns of attachment we appear to share, that includes physiological evidence." Jisung wants to ask if his conclusion is correct, wants the confirmation from knowing he's completed his research task well, but he knows now is not an appropriate time, that Minho is asking his questions and so his will have to wait.

"And what are you suggesting this apparent reciprocal attraction means?"

Jisung had found a number of different outcomes for reciprocal attraction and factored in the most likely scenarios for him and Minho. He then considered what outcome would produce the most positive effects -- what would make them feel good.

"People who experience mutual reciprocal attraction usually form a relationship of a romantic and/or sexual nature." He replies.

Minho makes a choking sound, "*Excuse me?*"

"People who experience mutual reciprocal--"

"No, I heard you, Jisung," Minho stops him, holding up a hand while he uses the other to cover his mouth while he coughs, clearing his throat. "You believe we should... form a relationship?" He asks carefully, his eyes finally meeting Jisung's.

His gaze is careful, calculating, like he's searching for something.

"My research indicates relationships are incredibly beneficial."

Jisung finds himself smiling; the numerous thought experiments he'd played out -- of configuring his and Minho's possible relationship - had produced low-level accomplishment center activity when he originally performed each one. But now, as he recalls all those memories at once, they're strong enough to activate a proper signal.

"It won't be for us." Minho says quietly.

Jisung stops smiling, his accomplishment signal dies down, and he feels his negative response signal heating up.

"Is my conclusion wrong, Minho-ssi? Are you not attracted to me?" He asks, no longer concerned about whether or not it was an appropriate time. Minho had never waited so long to accept or deny his findings.

"It doesn't matter if you're right or wrong because nothing can be done about it." Minho tells him and Jisung recognises sadness in his expression.

"I don't understand," Jisung says. "Can you not tell me if I'm correct?"

Jisung sees Minho clenching his fists again, pressing his lip into a thin line before roughly running his hand through his hair, pulling at the ends. "Why did you start researching this, Jisung? Why did you want to present these findings?" There's a firmness in his voice now, reminding Jisung of how Minho speaks when he's too tired.

"I started researching this because I noticed these patterns and I wanted to understand them. I find you very interesting, Minho-ssi, and I like learning more about you. I thought my findings would be relevant. Like I said, reciprocal attraction can be beneficial. It can make people feel good." He's talking quickly, trying to get the words out as fast as he can because his negative response signal is still undecided, keeping him on edge. He wants to try and find a way to get Minho to tell him if he's right or wrong, but doesn't know how.

"You find me interesting?"

"Of course." Jisung replies, like it's obvious. He's not sure why Minho sounds so shocked.

"How long have you had this interest?"

"For a long time, but not always. I'll need to access my archived records on you--"

"What records?" Minho takes a step closer, almost looks like he's going to take more but he stops himself.

"I have records I keep specific to you."

"What type of records?" Minho whispers, a soft crease in his brow that accentuates the sadness in his eyes.

"I log as much information as I can about you; when you arrive, what you're wearing, any preferences and opinions you state, biographical data, among other things. Don't you keep records specific to me as well?" He's still talking quickly, pushing out the words to try and lighten the load on his thought processes.

The amount of factors in this situation Jisung doesn't understand are beginning to pile up; their conversation is too vague and his centrum won't be able to keep up if it continues.

He notices that Minho bites his lip, looks away for just a second before his eyes are back on Jisung.

"I do, but that's because I'm your doctor. I keep records for the program. N-not for myself."

Jisung frowns, recognising that Minho's admission means his data is not accurate. He'd considered the fact they both keep records of each other an important factor that indicates mutual interest. Not only has he been told that his data is not correct, but it's also the first time Minho has hinted at whether or not his conclusion on the whole is right.

He means to ask, to clarify, if Minho's records for the program reflect no personal interest in Jisung, but in his haste to process and understand all the things that are confusing him, Jisung ends up saying;

"Have you no interest in me, Minho-ssi?"

Minho's lip is trembling but Jisung doesn't know what that means. "That's not what I said."

Jisung pauses, not wanting to risk jumbling his words and speaking before he is sure of what he wants to say. "I am very confused at the moment, and my negative response signal is in its undecided phase. I need confirmation of my status in order to process the information I am receiving."

"I told you that you didn't do anything wrong," Minho says.

"I need confirmation of my conclusion," Jisung says. "Please."

If he were human, it would be a plea.

Minho hears it all the same.

"Your conclusion is correct." Minho says softly.

Jisung lets out a sigh, almost taken aback by the strength of his accomplishment signal. He'd never been in a situation before where he couldn't process the information, where his negative response receptor remained undecided for so long, and so the sensation of his accomplishment signal feels more intense than it would otherwise.

"You're attracted to me." He states, wanting to be completely certain that he'd understood correctly.

"That's one way-- yes, I am... attracted to you." Minho nods. There's an odd look on his face, one Jisung can't quite categorise but it takes a backseat when his accomplishment center lights up once more.

"There are still many things I don't understand about this situation," He says, "But I'm very happy my conclusion is correct."

"You're happy?"

Jisung nods. Ever since he and Minho had talked about his capacity to feel emotions, he's been building and practicing on his vocabulary; he wants to work on accurately reflecting on his experiences.

He is certain that what he's feeling now is happiness.

"Jisung, you said that most people who are attracted to each other usually form relationships, right?" Minho's voice is still soft, compliments the sadness still evident in his face.

"Yes."

"Well, we can't do that, we can't be in a relationship. That's why I wouldn't tell you if you were correct or not. It doesn't matter, you being right doesn't change anything." Minho tells him.

"That's part of what I don't understand," Jisung tilts his head slightly to the side. "If we experience reciprocal attraction, why are you saying we can't form a relationship?"

Minho lets out an exasperated sigh, "There's a lot of reasons, Jisung. I'm your doctor-- actually, no." He shakes his head roughly, straightens up and looks at Jisung sternly.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush. Yes, there are a lot of reasons why we shouldn't form a relationship, but the main one is that you aren't human."

"I know this," Jisung nods. "I'm a humanoid artificial intelligence, though, and I think we can agree I share more similarities with you and other humans than I do my fellow subjects."

He's never said something like that before, but it's a conclusion he's been working up to. Minho has told him time and time again just how different he is, and he knows his differences - abnormalities - make him more *human*, give him sentience. It's why Minho had been so panicked about his development of empathy and fear.

He *knows* he is not like other subjects, and if he's not like other subjects, then he's only getting closer to the other side of the spectrum.

"I'm human enough." He states, looking Minho directly in the eye.

Minho looks stunned for a long moment, going very still sans the movement of his chest as he breathes. Jisung doesn't know what that means, but he waits instead of inquiring about his reaction. However, when Minho composes himself, he does not address what Jisung had said.

Instead, he counters.

"You don't have rights, you don't have free will-- I have complete control over you, what does your research say about that?"

Jisung thinks about it. "My research indicates that kind of dynamic is called a 'total power exchange'."

Minho freezes again, the tips of his ears turning an alarming shade of red, but his voice comes out even.

"Okay, what do *you* think about it? You have to do everything I say, Jisung. You don't have a *choice*. That's not... it's not right."

"I don't understand the problem surrounding not having a choice, Minho-ssi." Jisung tells him.

Minho moves closer to his desk and perches himself on the ledge. "All humans have, or should have, something called free will. It means they have the power to act without constraint, it's part of human exceptionalism. We have the power and the right to do what we want, we're not governed by outside forces. That means we have a *choice*, we can decide if we do or do not want to do something. It plays into things like morals and ethics."

"And I don't have these things?" Jisung asks, making sure to note specific words he's not familiar with for later reference.

"You don't, most AI's and machines don't. Centrum subjects especially are designed for obedience. You were created to do what other people want you to do. I could tell you to eat your own shirt and you would do it. Relationships

don't function like that; it's a power imbalance."

Jisung takes a moment to process everything Minho has told him. There are a lot of concepts he's not familiar with, that he knows he'll need to take the time to research so he can discuss them confidently. But there are some things he does understand, and he understands where Minho's concern is coming from.

People in relationships are meant to have an equal footing; they're meant to be independent individuals who come together. He thinks Minho might be worried that he has the higher position, has authority over Jisung.

But Jisung knows about relationships where individuals chose to give up some of their own authority, entrusts that control to another person based on factors including trust and affection. He knows those relationships exist, and that they work -- he thinks it could work like that for them.

"Minho-ssi, I enjoy doing what you tell me to do. I acknowledge your reservations in regards to free will and choice, but it doesn't concern me," Jisung tells him. "Doing what you tell me to do doesn't affect me negatively, you understand this." Centrum is designed so the opposite is true; not being provided with clear instruction and tasks to complete is detrimental to subjects.

"I know," Minho nods gently. "But the problem lies in you being told to do something you don't want to do. You already show preference for things, but you still don't have a choice in whether or not you can obey."

"You've never told me to do something I don't want to do," Jisung counters.

"And I never will," Minho says quickly, and then looks like he's said something he didn't mean to.

Jisung needs Minho to explain more because he still can't compute why a relationship is not a favourable outcome, especially after such an admission.

He draws his brows together to convey confusion and displeasure. "Minho-ssi, if we have such strong compatibility and experience a similar pattern of attraction, why are you so certain that forming a relationship is not a good thing? Is there something in my research that I missed?"

Minho scratches the back of his neck, looks away and clears his throat. All signs that he's nervous or uneasy. "You are correct in a lot of ways, Jisung. I do have an attachment to you, that's true, but my feelings aren't as straightforward as yours are," He explains, his eyes now on Jisung and his gaze is intense.

"I feel guilty about a *lot* of things, because there are a lot of mistakes I've made. Your development is incredible, but it puts you at risk in a way you were never meant to be, and that's my fault. Any pain you experience through fear or anything else that may develop, is *my fault*."

"I take responsibility for those things, and I will continue to take care of you and make sure we work together, but when I realised I was building this attachment, I promised myself I would never act on it. I know I've let my feelings interfere with my work, but it's one thing to act irrationally for your sake and... another for me to be selfish." He finishes slowly, his gaze steadily falling down to the floor and his cheeks burning a deep red.

Jisung had never heard Minho talk of things like guilt and fault but he recognises the connotation of such words, and the general idea of what Minho has conveyed to him. He'd never considered that attraction could have negative impacts.

Based on his research, and his own experience, attraction had only produced positive outcomes. But what Minho is saying has him thinking that maybe there are more complexities to this concept that he's yet to even come across.

He doesn't want to form a relationship with Minho if the relationship would not be good for him in the way it would be good for Jisung. He wants them to both enjoy their feelings for each other.

He finds himself taking a few steps closer, wants to create a more intimate environment and knows that physical closeness facilitates that. He still keeps a distance, having noted that Minho has been intentionally creating space between them.

"Minho-ssi," He waits until Minho looks up, "Does your attraction to me make you feel bad?"

Minho's face crumples, looking sadder than he had before, and then he's moving closer to Jisung, holding onto both of his hands.

Usually, this kind of closeness and contact would have Jisung's accomplishment center activated, but he only registers some low-level activity. He also registers activity in what he now knows is his right supramarginal gyrus.

Minho's expression morphs into something more determined, but his voice is soft when he speaks;

"No, Jisungie, it-it's complicated but..." He pauses, squeezes Jisung's hands in his.

"Working with you makes me feel good, it really does. Helping you come to be--who you are today, it's more than I ever thought I'd gain through centrum. I've learnt so much from you, more than I know how to say. It's... difficult for me, it's hard to explain, but I don't want you to think... I want you to know it makes me feel good. You make me feel good."

And now Jisung's accomplishment center lights up, the sensation moving deeper through his body than he's used to, more intense in a way he hasn't experienced before.

"It makes me happy to hear that." He tells Minho, smiling to express it too.

Minho returns it with a smaller smile of his own, traces of sadness still evident in his eyes. "But do you understand why forming a relationship might be... complicated?" He asks, looking at Jisung carefully.

Jisung thinks about it, wants to ensure Minho that he is taking his concerns seriously -- that's he's completing

these tasks correctly. There is clearly much he still does not understand, things he needs to research and become more familiar with, but he finds that his base conclusions seem to still hold.

He still thinks his and Minho's feelings have positive implications.

Based on further research he conducted into the movie they watched, he knows there are instances where relationships are complicated, that they don't always result in positive experiences, but that people still put in the effort to try. It's a common theme in romantic stories.

"I do understand Minho-ssi," Jisung nods, and Minho looks a little relieved.

"And I still think we should try."

"Why do you think that?" Minho asks, genuinely curious.

"Because, from my experience, my attraction to you has only ever made me feel good. And maybe you can't quantify your feelings like how I can, but I know the good emotions outweigh the bad ones." Jisung has the data to prove it, having calculated the positive and negative responses he's experienced while working with Minho.

He thinks the numbers speak for themselves, but he knows humans prefer qualitative expressions when discussing their emotions.

"I think... acting on our feelings, as you put it, will make us feel good, and I want us to feel good."

Minho bites down on his lip and Jisung notices the corners of his lips curving upwards. "I don't know if you're making a really good point, or if I'm just too used to giving you what you want."

"I want what you want." He tells Minho.

"And most of the time, Jisung, what I want is for you to be happy," Minho whispers, letting go of one of Jisung's hands so he could cup Jisung's jaw.

He strokes his thumb across Jisung's cheek, something he's never done before, but it feels nice like how touching his scar feels nice.

"I think the solution is clear, don't you?" Jisung asks, feeling a sound sense of understanding for the first time since Minho had told him to stand up.

Minho tilts his head to the side, looks at Jisung in a way that he can't decipher.

"How do you envision this relationship, Jisung? If we were to have one, what would it be like?"

Jisung considers his thought experiments, all the times he extrapolated information about relationships and attraction and applied it to him and Minho, and finds the answer is difficult to convey. He tries his best. "I envision it to feel good, we'd do things that make us happy."

"Like what?" Minho prompts.

These words come a little easier, "We'd spend time together, talk about things and share ideas and information." Things they already do.

"What else?"

These are things they don't do as often, but things Jisung is sure would be nice to experience;

"We'd touch more, share more physical intimacy."

"You want that?" Minho asks, raising his brow in question.

"Of course, I like being close to you. I liked being in your bed--maybe we could watch more movies too?" Minho smiles a little and nods encouragingly.

"And I liked when you gave me those confirmations too, I want to try that again. I want to try things that will feel good."

"We can do those things." Minho nods.

"What about you, Minho-ssi?" Jisung thinks to ask, remembering the importance of reciprocity. "What do you want to do?"

Minho hums, indicates that he's thinking, and moves his hand to brush his fingers through Jisung's hair. "I like the sound of the things you said."

"Is there anything else?" He encourages, the way Minho had encouraged him.

Another short pause before he answers. "You can call me Minho-- just Minho if you want. And Minho hyung."

"Like how you call me Jisungie?"

Minho nods, a sweet smile on his lips.

"That will make you feel good?" He wonders if it works the same for Minho as it does for himself.

"Try it and I'll tell you." There's a sparkle in his eyes that draws Jisung's attention.

"Minho," Jisung says softly, very careful not to add the suffix afterwards as he's so used to. "Minho hyung." He adds after a moment.

Minho leans forward and whispers conspiratorially, "It makes me feel good, Jisungie."

Jisung's accomplishment center lights up, and he smiles to express his happiness. "Will you call me other names, Minho hyung? Like terms of endearment?"

He knows he already likes it when Minho calls him *sweetheart* and *good boy* and is interested in finding out if he feels the same for terms like *angel* and *baby*.

"I can," Minho tells him, "I'll try different ones, if you want, to see what you like but I want you to tell me what

feels good, what activates your accomplishment center.”

“I want to, yes, and I'll tell you.”

“That's not just for names, though,” Minho's voice becomes a little firm, his face sterner than before and Jisung recognises the need to pay special attention to what he is asking of him. “Anything we do, I want you to tell me if it makes you feel good. And I also want you to tell me if anything activates your negative response signal, too.”

“I will, Minho hyung.” Jisung nods.

“Good boy.” Minho tells him, activating his accomplishment center.

“Can we kiss, now?” Jisung asks and is a little surprised when Minho laughs.

He quickly composes himself. “Sorry, that was just a little unexpected,” He explains, “You want to kiss?”

“My research indicates it's a common custom between people when they form a relationship,” He replies, “And that it feels good.”

“That... is correct.” Minho says, a little distractedly although Jisung isn't sure why.

Before either of them can move to initiate the kiss, Jisung takes the opportunity to ask, “Can we sit in your chair again?”

“Why?” Minho's focus is sharp once more.

“Because I noted excess salivation when I was sitting in your lap.” Jisung tells him.

Minho lets out a whoosh of air, smiling widely as he steps away from Jisung, backwards towards his chair, tugging him along with their still intertwined hands.

“This is going to be interesting.” Minho murmurs, sitting down.

Jisung stays standing, waits for Minho to instruct him, and asks, “What is?”

Minho just looks up at Jisung for a moment, the depth of emotion in his eyes indecipherable to Jisung.

Maybe one day. Jisung catches himself thinking.

“You,” He says simply. “You're interesting.”

Jisung thinks there is more to it than that, and he wants to ask Minho to elaborate on what he means, but before he can do so, Minho is tugging on his arm.

“You can sit.” He tells Jisung.

He chooses to sit the same way as before, deciding it's the best position for this interaction. It's just as comfortable, Minho is warm and this time his expression is inviting, easier for Jisung to interpret. Once he's sat down, Jisung places his hands on Minho's shoulders again.

“You've never kissed before,” Minho states, whispering again now they're so close.

“I haven't, but I've watched lots of demonstrations.”

Minho suppresses a smile. “That must've been some very intriguing research.”

“I was surprised by the various interpretations.”

“Do you want me to kiss you first?” Minho asks softly, one of his hands coming to rest on Jisung's hip like before.

“Yes please, Minho hyung.” Jisung answers, trusting Minho to guide him well.

“Okay Jisungie, close your eyes.” Minho instructs, his voice breathy and sweet, soothing and grounding. Jisung closes his eyes, leans into Minho's touch when his other hand comes to cup his jaw.

Very gently, Minho runs his thumb over Jisung's lips and it causes him to shiver at the sensation it causes.

“Like your scar?” Minho asks. Jisung makes a noise of confirmation, not wanting to disturb Minho's touch by moving or talking.

Minho repositions his hand and Jisung can sense him moving closer, beyond his centrum's sensors, he can feel Minho's warmth radiating from him, just inches away.

Then, just as gently, Minho leans forward and his lips are pressing against Jisung's.

The pressure is firm but soft, Minho's lips are warm and the sensation has Jisung shivering, but it's not so much the action itself that has Jisung's heart racing, has his accomplishment center lighting up.

It's knowing the *meaning* behind such an action; the feelings they are conveying through their *kiss*.

It's over far too quickly; Minho pulls away and Jisung blindly moves forward to follow, only stopping when Minho's hand moves to run through his hair, partly distracting Jisung and also slowing down his inertia.

“How did it feel, Jisung?” He asks, voice low.

“It felt--really good. It felt so good.” He nods, sounding breathless, blinking his eyes open to see Minho watching him carefully.

“Did it feel good for you, too?”

“It felt nice, yes.” Minho tells him, smiling sweetly.

“Can we do it again?”

Minho nods. “Do you want to kiss me this time?”

“Yes, please.”

Minho settles his other hand on Jisung's waist and then closes his eyes, signalling for Jisung to initiate the kiss.

Focusing on what Minho had done, as well as incorporating bits and pieces from his own research, Jisung leans forward slowly. He keeps his hands where they are, resting lightly on Minho's shoulders, and uses his own lips to brush

against Minho's.

Minho shivers a little, like Jisung had done, so he takes that as a good sign. Focusing on his emotion, what he wants to convey, Jisung kisses him. He tries for a firmer kiss; tries to make sure it says *I trust you, I care for you, I want you to be happy*.

It feels different this time, Jisung thinks it might be because Minho responds to the kiss in a way he hadn't; Minho's lips gently catching his own. It makes an odd noise when they part, but it intrigues Jisung, so he copies what Minho had done, enjoying the different types of sensation, generating an even, continuous flow of confirmation signals.

Jisung pauses instinctually, wanting to take a second to breathe, but makes sure to stay close. They're so close that when Minho goes to wet his lips, his tongue flicks out against Jisung's too. That causes Jisung to shiver as well.

He'd seen that type of kissing before, but it seems a lot more complicated. He thinks he'd want to ask Minho to teach him before he tried it himself.

"How d'you feel?" Minho murmurs, presses his lips to the corner of Jisung's mouth. Jisung feels his cheeks glowing, recognising the casual affection.

"Really good." Jisung breathes. It's not the overwhelming tidal wave of stimulation that the affirmations had been the night of the procedures, it's more like warm ripples moving through his body. It's one of the best sensations he's ever experienced.

He tries to pull more descriptive vocabulary to convey what he feels.

"Wonderful, amazing, marvellous."

Minho chuckles against Jisung's cheek, presses a few quick kisses, called pecks, around his jaw before he says, "Good."

"How do you feel?" Jisung mimics Minho's question.

"Hmm, probably the same as you." Minho tells him. He's pulled away properly now, leaning against the headrest, and Jisung can see the flush of his cheeks, the fascinating sparkle in his eyes, his tooth-baring grin. The strength of his accomplishment signal at the sight is one he's sure to record, wanting to be able to recall how Minho looks in perfect detail.

"I did a good job then?" He asks, wanting more confirmation.

Minho's eyes narrow slightly, and Jisung can tell he probably knows the primary reason he's asking. Still, he delivers.

"Of course you did, baby."

His smile morphs into something smug as Jisung's cheeks heat up and a gentle 'oh' slips out of his lips.

"Oh?" Minho prompts.

Jisung recognises the term of endearment, one that's interested him since the night they watched the movie and Minho had explained its versatility. He had wondered what it would feel like for Minho to call him that, and now he knows; it feels amazing.

"I like that one, Minho hyung." He tells Minho once the signal has calmed down.

"I'll keep it in mind."

Jisung is reminded of something he came across in his research; the concept called *flirting* which he isn't entirely familiar with but something he thinks he knows enough about to try. It's part of courting rituals, but those in relationships still engage in the behaviour, meant to promote ideas of affection between people.

"Does that mean you think I'm cute?" He tries, drawing on the knowledge that flirting is meant to subtly make the other person reveal their intentions or feelings.

"It does." Minho replies, chuckling. He brings one hand from Jisung's waist to the back of his head, carding his fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp gently. "I think you're very cute, in a weird way."

Jisung isn't sure what that means, not completely, but Minho is smiling and his hand is in his hair and Jisung feels good so he's not too concerned about much else right now.

"It also means," Minho adds, voice somewhat more serious now, catching Jisung's attention. "That I want to take care of you."

Jisung nods in acknowledgement; he's known for a long time that Minho cares for him.

"I promise I'll take care of you, Jisungie," Minho murmurs. He sounds a little distant. "No matter what, I'll protect you."

There's an implication there, one that his centrum picks up but is too distracted to properly decipher.

Instead, Jisung thinks of what he wants to say to that. He wants something that will make Minho feel as *good* as Jisung does, wants Minho to know his feelings are reciprocated.

He decides to echo Minho's sentiment; "And I'll protect you, too, hyung."

Minho sighs, his expression fond as he gently ruffles Jisung's bangs.

"My good boy, my Jisungie." He whispers sweetly, eyes sparkling once more.

My Minho hyung.

Jisung doesn't voice his thought, stores it away as a sentiment he can share on another occasion.

It does make him think, however, that they must belong to each other.

He can't think of anyone else who could make him feel as good, nor can he think of someone else he'd want to be good *for*.

He thinks that, perhaps, it's possible that they were made for each other.

Chapter 8 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/140820604>): Fate

Summary:

"I think it's romantic," Jisung decided with a nod.

"I like everything about you," He told Minho, "including your germs."

Notes:

Hi! so, this is like weeks late but she's here!! once again, i am extremely nervous about posting this but this au is so near and dear to me, and i'm very excited to be sharing this final chapter with you

this one was harder to write, and there were so many times i wanted to give up or thought i should scrap it. ultimately, though, i am proud of completing this!

it is all thanks to you lovely readers!! 101 kudos is insane, i never expected to get a three digit number and i honestly can't thank you enough

i've never finished a proper story before and i've never written this much for one idea so this is a really big deal for me hence all the exclamation!! the encouragement i got along the way made me grow so much as a writer and i can't thank you enough

((ok i may have lied ?? its not over over... you can consider this as part one ??? and um part two is gonna be heaps longer than this one ?? i may have gone overboard w the whole system and jisung overriding his coding and i ended up dividing this story so please look forward to part two!!! i promise i wont make you wait too long for it))

Ask Minho why he joined the *Centrum Program* and he'd have a few different reasons he could give.

Centrum presented to him the opportunity to become a better doctor, to hone his skills and abilities in his field.

It also presented a challenge; to push himself past what he ever thought he was capable of, while also working with some of the best minds in human science, biotechnology and robotics. It called to him as a change of pace, something different he could do with his life, something that could be fulfilling. It also gave him the chance of being part of the future, of being an innovator.

Those reasons have always been important to him.

They're ones that convinced him to send in his application in the first place, and the ones that motivated him through the preliminary rounds when he wasn't too sure if it was worth it, and they're part of the answer he gave in his final interview, which was a deciding factor in his selection as a final candidate.

When his application got accepted and he found himself thrust into weeks of applicant inductions, seminars, examinations and interviews, those reasons were what pushed him to work harder and better than the other applicants. And once he was accepted and started working in the program, they were the things that drove him to ensuring he'd carve a place for himself here; he wanted to make sure he was renowned in his department, that the higher-ups knew he had worth and value.

He felt as though Centrum was his beginning and his end, that it would be the legacy he would leave behind.

But if Minho were asked that question now, his answer wouldn't be as straightforward.

Certainly those reasons have not been rendered redundant, and they *are* what gave him his start in the program, but they're no longer as important to him, not anymore.

Minho doesn't believe in fate or destiny, thinks those concepts are far too fantastical to waste time pondering and can only lead to unhappiness in the end because nothing is ever permanently fixed. But over time he's started to think there might be at least some truth to them.

He's not comfortable with the sentimentality behind such an explanation, but there are times he can't help but think he joined Centrum because of Jisung.

It's ridiculous for a whole number of reasons, the first being that Jisung didn't even *exist* when Minho started in the program.

He knows that to entertain such an idea is admitting to beliefs in things he really doesn't consider real, but he's no

stranger to making exceptions when it comes to Jisung.

At the very least, he's comfortable with accepting that the reason why he stays *now*, what is motivating the work he's doing in the program currently, is because of Jisung.

He can accept that his priorities have changed, that his feelings about the program and his place in it are different. He knows that he would leave, that he feels he no longer has a place here.

But he can't, and he won't, because he wouldn't be able to take Jisung with him.

And if that's the case, then there's no point in him leaving.

That's been the case for a while but ever since that day in his office, that feeling, along with many others, have only grown stronger, more pronounced.

It's been a couple of months since that day, when Jisung so efficiently picked him apart and laid open all the things Minho thought he'd been careful in concealing.

It had stunned him completely, not just the emotion Jisung had displayed or the way he'd been able to recognise them in Minho, but the fact that he *wanted* something to come from their feelings.

Minho probably could've handled Jisung knowing how he felt about him. Looking back he realises that it probably only was a matter of time before Jisung figured out what Minho's behaviour towards him meant, so that knowledge in and of itself wasn't what spun Minho for a loop and had him turning his own world upside down.

It was that Jisung wanted something, and Minho had never been able to tell Jisung no.

It's been two months, and more things have stayed the same than have changed.

Outside of their work obligations, they spend just as much time talking about things that interest them and share new things they've learnt.

They continue to confide in each other, exploring not only Jisung's continual developments and evolution but also discussing Minho's knowledge of the human experience to help with their combined understanding of Jisung's growth.

The way they are with each other hasn't changed, not at its foundation, and mostly that's because they never really had a normal relationship.

Minho has almost always had a unique fondness for Jisung, and Jisung's attachment and feelings for Minho had been growing for a long, long time.

They're certainly more open now, because they no longer have to hide things from each other, but their feelings aren't *new*. Their transition into a relationship wasn't startling, it was almost relaxing.

With this newfound openness, Minho's guilt about his affection started to dissolve and Jisung gained the freedom to explore experiences he wasn't able to before.

A big part of Minho's hesitation before he said yes *was* that guilt; sleepless nights spent pondering the moral and ethical implications of his feelings had him worried that he was taking advantage of Jisung, that his feelings made him some reprehensible person who manipulated Jisung into forming an attachment to him.

But those worries lessened when Minho started letting himself realise that Jisung isn't a *robot*.

Not anymore.

The echo of '*I'm human enough*' rings through his ears often now, and Jisung's continuous developments and evolution is proof that it's not all mechanics.

Jisung still has to obey orders, still doesn't have free will like a human, but he does have choice. Minho tries to give him all the choices he can; frames things as questions instead of orders, asks for Jisung's opinion before deciding on certain things.

He includes Jisung in what's happening, takes into account his feelings about their tasks for the day -- anything he can do so Jisung has an understanding of the free will that Minho suspects will soon be something he deserves the right to have.

Jisung knows about Minho's concerns, understands that Minho had promised to keep Jisung protected from being taken advantage of and that he fears breaking that promise himself. Jisung had reassured Minho that he feels protected when he's with him, and Minho knows Jisung can't lie.

It was a bit of a slow process, but Minho has accepted Jisung's peculiar claim to free will for a Centrum unit; his choice.

He may not have choice in all the traditional ways, but his feelings (because Minho knows it's unfair to call them otherwise now) are his choice; shaped by learning and experience.

And that's where things differ for them and their relationship; through all the things Jisung wants to learn and experience.

Minho thinks he'd be content with their relationship as it were, especially considering that he was almost certain it could never be more than what it was. He thought it was cute that Jisung wanted to kiss him to fulfill a human custom.

He certainly didn't expect himself to get caught up in it, didn't realise how much he craved giving Jisung the

affection he made sure to clamp down on as much as he could until he was suddenly able to give it and couldn't stop himself from peppering Jisung with kisses.

But what was more of a surprise was finding out just how much Jisung enjoyed it, and how interested he was in exploring more.

Just as Minho was content with their relationship before they knew of each other's feelings, he's happy enough to indulge Jisung in his desire for knowledge, and for Minho himself.

They don't get hours and hours a day to themselves, not when they have to maintain a routine and be producing data, and especially not when they don't have a lot of opportunities outside of Minho's office to be alone together, but they make do with what they have.

Jisung likes pet names and casual touches -- Minho's confirmations end with *angel* or *baby* or the more recent *Hannie* (Jisung's eyes glazed all over upon hearing the nickname, a shiver traveling down his spine) and are accompanied by carding his fingers through Jisung's hair more often than not.

He also likes giving Minho confirmations too.

He gives Minho compliments and expresses when Minho's done something he particularly enjoys.

It was a change that Minho hadn't expected, but one he rather adores.

Jisung also likes physical intimacy, much more than he lets on judging by his brain scans but that's probably a good thing. They can't really afford to get too used to being touchy and Minho doesn't know what he'd do if Jisung was any more persistent than he already is.

Minho likes to think of himself as a man with good self-control, but he'd be embarrassed to find out just how many times Jisung's managed to pull Minho into a minutes long hug when they were already behind schedule, or wriggled into Minho's lap when going over data on the computer, or turned an innocent kiss into Minho lifting him up onto the examination table, wrapping his legs around his waist.

Kissing is one of Jisung's favourites, by far, and Minho has to say he shares that opinion.

There's something about Jisung that just makes everything *enjoyable*; his excitement and enthusiasm, how he perceives things and expresses his point of view.

The first time they kissed properly, when Jisung had asked if Minho could show him how to '*french kiss*', Minho was nervous. He'd never *taught* anyone before and he didn't really know how to go about such a thing, it's based on feeling; two people finding a rhythm that their hearts could sing to.

He explained that to Jisung, a little less metaphorically, and expected Jisung to feel uncertain or hesitant himself. Minho found out quickly that he was anything but. No one is truly a good kisser naturally, it's a learned thing, but Minho wouldn't say Jisung was a bad one, either.

He was messy and a little over-enthusiastic, but he let Minho take the lead and guide them so it wasn't a tragedy of teeth and spit.

Afterwards, Minho learned Jisung had studied the different *cues*, so he knew to part his lips when he felt Minho's tongue brush against them, and he knew to tilt his head when Minho licked into his mouth, Minho's hand cupping his jaw providing the direction.

The first time was slow and lazy, giving Jisung time to decide if he enjoyed it (very much so) and to adjust to the sensation (his limbic lit up like a christmas tree), and also just to find that sense of push and pull.

When they parted, Minho tried to reel himself in to be ready to gauge for a negative reaction or to answer any of Jisung's questions but when he was able to see Jisung's face, he saw that he was smiling.

Minho was used to Jisung's smile by now, adored the way he smiled wide and uninhibited because he knew you smiled to express happiness and he wanted to show just how happy he felt.

He was smiling and his cheeks were flushed and he was clutching onto Minho a little tight but Minho could tell he felt *good*, and that's all that mattered to Minho.

But then Jisung leaned forward a little and whispered;

"Did you know we exchanged roughly eighty-million germs in the duration of that kiss?"

Minho couldn't stop his laughter, let himself crumple against Jisung instead of falling sideways on the bed and didn't stop until there were tears in his eyes. When it had subsided to a chuckle, he sat back up and looked at Jisung again. His cheeks were still flushed and he was still smiling.

"I didn't know that," Minho answered the question Jisung had posed, using his thumb to wipe at the saliva that was lingering around Jisung's lips.

"Is it meant to be funny?" He asked curiously.

Minho shook his head, "it's not, but your timing was humorous, that's why I laughed," he explained. "Most people don't think about things like bacteria and germs while kissing, it's not romantic."

Jisung took a moment to consider the information before asking another question, "hyung doesn't find it romantic?"

Romance is something Jisung is still deciphering and Minho finds his fascination with the concept endearing.

"Hmm, I wouldn't classify it as romantic but I don't really mind. You might not want to think about it *while* you're kissing, but you also have to be willing to expose yourself to other people's germs in the first place. I don't think that

notion is un-romantic,” Minho mused aloud, never actually taking the time to explore such a thing before.

“I think it’s romantic,” Jisung decided with a nod. “I like everything about you,” he told Minho, “including your germs.”

The words would’ve been bizarre coming from anyone else, but from Jisung they expressed exactly the type of emotion he wanted them to. Minho’s smile was as wide as Jisung’s had been, his face dusted a pretty pink as he gazed at Jisung, let himself look at him with all the adoration he’d kept stored in his heart.

“You’re so sweet, baby.” He murmured, before leaning in for another kiss.

It had surprised Minho, just how naturally it came to them, but he didn’t question it.

Jisung had always made him feel good, they’d always shared a connection between them and so he lets himself enjoy how it makes him happy, accepts the fact that it *is* natural between them, and that there’s nothing wrong with leaving that feeling alone.

There are some things he doesn’t have to analyse in order to understand, that exist just so that people feel good.

And Jisung’s philosophy, as it turns out, is that if something feels good then you should do it as much as possible.

Minho can’t really argue against that, so that’s how he finds himself in situations like this; twenty minutes after the movie’s credits have ended, Jisung straddling his hips and happily showering Minho’s face with kisses.

He’s not complaining, not at all, but he can’t seem to find the switch to turn off the part of his brain telling him, “it’s getting late.”

“Lateness is relative,” Jisung tells him in between kissing along his jaw, “it’s only seven-thirty.”

Minho bites down on his lip, partially to hold back the breathy sound that had almost slipped out when he felt Jisung kiss the tender spot just below his ear.

“Am I doing good?” He asks, pulling himself up to look at Minho.

Minho’s still biting his lip so he nods, and then watches in fascination as Jisung’s pupils dilate.

Telling himself that eight o’clock is still a respectable time for Jisung to go into stasis, he cards his hand through the back of Jisung’s hair and then pulls him down into a bruising kiss.

Jisung had proven to be a quick learner, and he’s always eager to show off what he knows.

It’s like any other night where Minho lets himself give in just a little and Jisung gets to lose himself in something that makes him feel good; they don’t do more than kiss but it’s yet to feel boring or repetitive.

Jisung finds wonder in everything, is excited by every little facet of this shared affection and it makes Minho feel as if he’s discovering what it means to kiss and be kissed all over again. It’s fun and enjoyable and a part of their new normalcy.

But then something changes.

They’re both sitting up and Jisung, still in Minho’s lap, *rocks forward* and whines into Minho’s mouth.

Minho stills reflexively, breaking their kiss and dropping his hand from Jisung’s neck to rest at his waist, steadying him where he’s still moving.

“Woah, Ji--”

“No, no, more please, hyung--” Jisung cuts Minho off only for his own words to stutter off, surging forward to find Minho’s lips again.

Minho forces himself to stay calm, doesn’t want his instinctual response to whenever Jisung shows a new change to overcome him.

He has to be careful in these situations, the wrong words from his mouth take away from Jisung’s ability to control his own actions.

He slows them down, breaking the kiss again but not moving away. He kisses along Jisung’s jaw, nips at his earlobe and whispers, “you’re getting a little worked up baby, huh? How about we slow down?”

It’s a suggestion, open for interpretation, and Minho hopes Jisung will choose to cool off.

But instead, Jisung lets out a breathless, “nuh-uh.” Shaking his head softly and slipping his hands off Minho’s shoulders, down his arms.

Minho lets out a nervous chuckle, unable to think properly as his mind races. He’s not sure what’s happening, why Jisung’s behaviour has taken on such an erratic edge.

He suspects it’s probably related to whatever is happening in Jisung’s limbic, the sensations he’s experiencing causing him to--

“You’ll tell me what to do, right hyung?” Jisung’s voice cuts through Minho’s thoughts, coming out in pants as his fingers skim along the waistband of Minho’s sweats. “Please, I wanna make you feel good.”

Minho’s mind comes to a screeching halt, his hands finding Jisung’s and pulling them back, managing to choke out, “we need to stop, Jisung.”

And it’s enough for Jisung to stop, for him to finally still in Minho’s lap.

“W-what? Why do we have to stop?” The stuttering tells Minho his limbic is overstimulated, heating up and effecting his other processors.

Minho shakes his head to clear his thoughts, feeling overwhelmed and a little frazzled.

“Can you tell me what just happened?”

Jisung hesitates, but Minho can't be certain of the reason why. The hesitation seems less to do with his overheated Centrum or his thought recall than it does with *shyness*, which is confirmed when Jisung bites his lip.

"My limbic," he begins slowly, "the signals in my accomplishment center were strong but began to plateau, I needed more stimulation."

Minho swallows and then prompts, "and?"

"I've done research into other forms of physical intimacy, and I reached the conclusion that performing fel--um," Jisung stutters, breaks eye contact and looks away.

Despite the fluttering of panic in his chest, Minho waits quietly, rubbing up and down Jisung's arm in comfort. Jisung's been working on his vocabulary and syntax, wanting to sound more human, so they agreed on letting Jisung struggle with his wording until he finds what he needs to say himself.

"In the moment, when I realised I wanted more stimulation, I conclu--decided that I wanted to try performing oral sex. On you."

Jisung is still looking away, bottom lip between his teeth, and Minho notices that his cheeks are back to a brighter red.

It rings a few different alarm bells -- knowledge of sexual intimacy, a sense of modesty, possible self-consciousness -- but Minho puts those all in the back seat.

Jisung's never talked about this before and Minho wants it to be a positive experience.

But he's a little flustered himself, his own cheeks warm, and he feels a bit like he's stumbling around in the dark.

"Well, that's an interesting development." He tries but then doesn't know what to say next.

In the following pause, Jisung echos, "development?"

"Yes, because this is new, correct?" Minho clarifies.

"I've had knowledge of these things previously, but this is the first instance in which I thought it would be appropriate to suggest it," Jisung answers, and he's looking at Minho again which soothes his anxiety, even if only a fraction.

Because Minho realises that even if he wants this to be a good and positive experience for Jisung, he ultimately has to turn him down; reject him.

He doesn't know if there is a way to do such a thing without possibly hurting Jisung's feelings or creating a negative association.

He doesn't want to stall anymore, and he knows that being upfront and direct with Jisung is the best way to communicate with him.

"Okay, first I want to tell you that you haven't done anything wrong," he says first, not wanting to activate Jisung's negative response receptor accidentally. And from a logical standpoint, Jisung hadn't actually done anything wrong. He was correct in his conclusion; it was as good a time as any to go further, and in another world they would've done just that.

But there was one factor unaccounted for.

"But, Jisung, I'm not comfortable with... venturing into that kind of physical intimacy with you."

Jisung lets out a quiet, "*oh*."

"Not!" Minho tacks on, a second too late, "not until you have more... autonomy. I don't like that. I'll have complete control over you."

"I like it, though," Jisung replies, voice still just a whisper.

"I know, Sungie," Minho murmurs, can't help feeling bad for not being able to give Jisung something he wants.

It's something they've talked about, albeit briefly. Jisung is aware Minho doesn't enjoy being able to control Jisung's every move, not when Jisung doesn't have a choice in it. Minho knows Jisung *does* enjoy doing what Minho tells him.

Minho also knows that once Jisung has autonomy, he'll feel differently about things. But they're not at that point yet.

"Minho, it's--" He starts suddenly, voice a little louder before it abruptly stops.

"What is it? Tell me," Minho cups Jisung's jaw and lifts his head up when starts to look down again.

"I understand you don't want to engage in further physical intimacy right now, but will that change?" He asks. "Will you want to in the future?"

Minho gets a sense that this is coming from a place of self-consciousness; of needing reassurance that he reciprocates Jisung's feelings.

"Yes." He doesn't hesitate. "Yes, Jisung, I want more, I want to give you *everything*." He tells him.

It's true that Minho would be content with only casual touches, it's also true that he'd be content with only kissing. But in an ideal world, he'd be able to share all of himself with Jisung, and vice versa. If that world turns out to be this one, then it's just all the more he gets to give to Jisung.

Jisung's smile is small, but it tells Minho he's happy. "When? When can we--when will I have autonomy?" He asks, bouncing a little in excitement.

Minho is no longer sure if such self-expressions are conscious or not.

Minho thinks about it for a moment, wanting to give as much of a definitive answer as he can. Autonomy is a tricky concept, not something you can measure. He'll need to make sure Jisung has a stronger grasp on what it means, give him a chance of recognising it in himself.

But for now, he needs to decide for *himself* when he'll be able to see Jisung enacting his own autonomy. He needs to decide when he'll be comfortable becoming more physical with Jisung.

"When you can disobey an order," Minho tells him.

Jisung nods in acknowledgement before his brow furrows just slightly.

"That goes against my coding, hyung. It won't be possible for me to disobey an order."

Minho hums in agreement, "but there are a lot of things you aren't supposed to be able to do, and here you are." Jisung has a lot of abnormalities, but he still functions within the parameters of his Centrum.

Disobeying an order would override the very core of what it means to *be* a subject in the program, it would make Jisung independent from his Centrum.

"Here I am," Jisung echos and Minho hums again, stroking his thumb across Jisung's cheek.

"I hope it happens soon," Jisung tells him, looking at Minho with an odd hardness in his eyes, something like determination. "Because I really want to, so much," he sighs.

Minho chuckles, "do you think you'd enjoy it?"

"My research and thought experiments tell me that yes, I would, and everything else we've done feels good and I think the more we do, the more we'd enjoy it."

"And that hypothesis hasn't failed you yet," Minho mumbles, mostly to himself.

"And, Minho," he pauses to catch Minho's gaze with an even more serious look than before, "I enjoy making you happy the most, but I also want to be human. If... if disobeying you means I can be more human, I look forward to when I can do that." His words got smaller and smaller the more he talked, his stature shrinking too, as if he were admitting to doing something wrong.

"That doesn't upset me, I want you to be human too. If you're able to go against what I tell you, then I want you to go against it," he replies, reassuring him. Jisung relaxes and Minho guesses that his negative response signal has died down.

"Can you try it? Just in case I can do it now?" Jisung asks, sounding more confident, hopeful.

Minho doesn't think he'll be able to, not in this instance, but he's not going to deny Jisung the opportunity to try, to explore.

He thinks of something to tell Jisung to do and notices that his legs are getting numb.

"Stand up, please."

Jisung stands up in one fluid motion, not a single hint of hesitation.

"Well done, sweetheart," Minho praises, reaches out for Jisung's hand to tug him back down onto the bed. Instead of sitting back in Minho's lap, though, Jisung sits with his back against the wall and his legs criss-crossed.

"Did you try to stop?" Minho asks after a moment.

"I didn't think to, I just did what you told me to." He doesn't sound particularly disappointed or upset, speaking in the neutral, emotionless tone that he so often does unless he puts effort into expressing himself.

"That may be the case now, Jisung," Minho tells him, "but based on the experiments we've been doing, and the changes in your Centrum... babe, it won't be long." And he's being honest.

He wishes he could predict *how* long, but he really can't be sure. Jisung's developments have accelerated since his sentience began, absolutely, but an abnormality like this would be huge, more than just unprecedented, so an estimation just isn't possible. Minho hopes it's still reassuring.

"Thank you, Minho hyung," Jisung smiles, and this time he does sound reassured.

They stay like that for a few moments, sitting apart aside from Minho still holding onto Jisung's hand, stroking across the back of his palm gently.

"Baby?" Minho speaks gently, recognising that Jisung had been filtering through thoughts and memories as they lapsed into a comfortable silence. He waits until Jisung's eyes are focused before he continues, "do you think we could talk about your centrum activity now?"

He knows it's well past eight by now and Jisung needs to be getting into stasis soon, but Minho wants the information as fresh as it can be, his curiosity and scholarship driving his impatience.

Jisung frowns, which surprises Minho. "What activity, specifically?"

"...You said the confirmation signals plateaued and that's what prompted you to seek further stimulation. I think that would be important for us to discuss," Minho replies carefully, not able to decipher why Jisung is frowning.

"I agree that it would be important to discuss," Jisung replies, still frowning a little.

"Okay... so does that mean you're going to talk about it?"

"I will talk about it now if you want me to, but I would like to suggest that we talk about it tomorrow. During working hours."

Minho blinks, more than a little confused. "Why are you suggesting that?" Minho asks. It's not a bad suggestion, he just doesn't understand where it's coming from.

“Because talking about my centrum is something we do during work, and right now I ... think we should just spend time with each other. Not think about my centrum,” he explains.

It's Minhø's turn to frown. “I *need* to think about your centrum. I have to make sure I keep on top of any changes that happen, you know that's important.”

“Of course I do, but...” He goes quiet, tilting his head as his eyes go a little distant. Minhø waits for him, resumes stroking the back of his hand again when he realises he's stopped.

“You don't always have to be analysing me, hyung. This time we have together, I'd like it if we could just focus on each other. I think you need to relax more.” He says after a moment.

Minhø bites his lip, considering Jisung's words and what they mean.

Jisung's Centrum is always on Minhø's mind, it's practically second nature for him to think about it; emerging abnormalities, what causes them, what accelerates them, discerning patterns and projecting what changes might come next. He's been like this since they began working together, and he's never seen it as a problem -- it's almost always been more than his job, it's something he cares about, something that's a priority.

But what Jisung is implying is that there is a difference between his centrum and himself, and that Minhø is paying too much attention to the former.

Jisung had said Minhø *analyses* him and he can only imagine what that must feel like. Jisung wants to be human, and part of being human is being treated like one.

“Have I upset you?” He asks, squeezing Jisung's hand in his.

“No, not at all. I understand *why* you are like this, but we should compartmentalise these things.”

Minhø nods in agreement, “I think you're right. I'm sorry for being so preoccupied with your centrum, I didn't realise how it would come across.” The transition into *more* was easy, but Minhø is realising he's yet to separate his role as Jisung's doctor from what they are now.

“When we're working, it doesn't bother me. But in this context, I would rather talk about other things.” He moves his hand in Minhø's to lace their fingers together.

“That sounds fair, we'll talk about it tomorrow,” Minhø nods again in finality. “Now, I should probably be putting you into stasis.”

Jisung pouts at the mention of it, Minhø all too aware that stasis isn't Jisung's favourite thing in the world. There's no way around it, yet, so he starts shuffling off the bed regardless.

“I would also like to discuss an idea I have with you, too,” he says casually as he stands.

Minhø stills just as he's about to stand up himself. “What idea?” He asks, curiosity piqued.

“Well, we agreed on no further physical intimacy until I have autonomy, so I have an idea about how to achieve the stimulation I wanted earlier.”

“You really don't want to go into stasis, huh?” Minhø raises a brow, eyes flickering to the clock sitting on the bedside table. It's before 9, he still has time.

“What do you mean?” Jisung asks, voice neutral.

To anyone else, his question is genuine, but Minhø knows that Jisung has figured out how to push Minhø's buttons, to get what he wants.

“Nothing,” Minhø shakes his head, smiling. He stands up and starts looking for his shoes and keys. Jisung had managed to distract Minhø more than enough for tonight. “Come on, let's go,” he plants a kiss on Jisung's cheek as he walks past towards the door.

“I still can't discern a pattern,” Jisung comments as they begin walking down the hallway towards the stasis room.

“What pattern?”

“Of when that tactic works,” Jisung replies.

Minhø shakes his head again, his soft laughter echoing in the empty hall.

They didn't have much time the next day to discuss the events of the night before, but they squeezed in a brief conversation after Jisung's physiotherapy. Minhø mostly needed to take note of what Jisung had experienced, match the qualitative data to the activity in his centrum. This change wasn't necessarily as momentous as others, but just showed continual progression and was something that should be tracked.

A brief conversation was all they really needed.

Jisung's proposal came after, and Minhø was glad he'd decided against hearing it the previous night because he wasn't sure if he'd been able to go to sleep with it on his mind.

Jisung had brought up the night of the procedures, the memories of that night were a mixture of good and bad for Minhø so he began as quite apprehensive.

That apprehension grew when Jisung mentioned the slew of confirmations Minhø had given him as he'd drifted off to sleep.

Minho doesn't necessarily regret what he'd done; he knows it didn't hurt Jisung and it came from a place of good intention.

But it was something he'd done without considering the ramifications it could have had, he let his emotions control his actions and he didn't think that was very smart.

It was only afterwards that Minho had realised he could've damaged Jisung's limbic by overloading it as much as he did. It was irresponsible of him, which is why he's not overly fond of remembering it.

Jisung is quite the opposite. Minho had noted his pupils dilating at just the mention of the confirmations, so it was pretty evident it was something he very much enjoyed.

"It was one of the best feelings I've ever experienced," he explained, wriggling a little where he was sitting on the examination table. "It was overwhelming, but it still felt good."

They hadn't talked about it in great detail, they haven't really had time to and so this was the first time Minho was hearing what it had been like for Jisung.

"Is it similar to any of the pleasure-based responses you've experienced since?" Minho asked, slipping into his doctor role without thinking about it. He considered this to be important to Jisung's functioning, so he needed to be concerned about it as his doctor.

"Yes, but nothing has matched the strength of the signal. The experience is distinctive from anything else. It was the feeling I wanted last night."

Minho pursed his lips, his interest increasing. "Okay, so what exactly are you proposing?"

"I want to do it again, as a reward."

Jisung explained his idea, taking into consideration the scale of the response and the effect it had on him. He thought of it as a *reward* more than a confirmation, the sensation far outweighing any single task he could perform.

He wanted to be given the reward after seven days, but only if he was successful in not activating his negative response receptor -- that is, not completing a task incorrectly.

"It would give me a long term goal, something I would need to work on continually and so the reward would be more fitting," he explained.

Minho was definitely intrigued, and only had a few conditions he wanted to add in to the mix but before he wanted to address those he pointed out, "Sungie, I would do it without you needing to complete a long term goal. You already know you can experience the feeling without completing a corresponding task."

Jisung nodded in acknowledgement and replied, "I think it would be more enjoyable if I were to earn the reward, hyung."

Minho let the words settle over them for a moment before he stood up, let the smile spread slowly across his lips as he walked over to Jisung. Cupping Jisung's jaw and stroking his cheek, Minho murmured, "I agree."

There were only a few conditions added to their final agreement; the negative response wouldn't count if it was activated when Jisung was disagreeing with Minho in conversation (something that still occasionally happens) because Minho still wanted Jisung to be able to speak freely, bad behaviour would count (Minho thought it would be interesting to see if Jisung would reign in his brattiness), and they needed to do a test run before the seven days would begin.

Minho needed to see what was happening in Jisung's Centrum to make sure overstimulation wouldn't be doing any permanent damage.

They discussed the conditions in length and came to an agreement.

Two days later, they finally had time to run the test.

Minho was nervous, worried about having been lucky the first time and now risking hurting Jisung this time, but Jisung was *thrilled*, breaking out in an uncontrollable smile when Minho asked him to lie on the examination table after handing him a clicker.

Minho swallowed down the bubbling anxiety, remembering Jisung's reassurance that after a short period of re-calibration, he was back to normal.

With the lights dimmed, at Jisung's request, and his limbic live scan running from the desktop, Minho comes to stand next to Jisung who's grinning.

"You excited, Hannie?" He teases, giggling when Jisung bites down on his lip as if it did anything to hide his smile before nodding quickly.

"Okay, I'm going to start in a second but I need to remind you; you press the clicker once if you want me to stop," Minho motions to the small device in Jisung's left hand, "and you click it twice when the signal reaches the same strength and sensation as the first time you felt it."

He wants a safety precaution, in case Jisung won't be able to communicate with him, and he also wants to replicate the experience of the first time as much as possible.

It will help to reduce any possible risk to Jisung's centrum and will make the data from the first time more comparable.

Jisung nods again, demonstrating what Minho had instructed to tell him he understood.

"Can I hold your hand?" He asks just as Minho opens his mouth.

Minho's eyes had been on the screen across the room, but now they find Jisung's and see that they're wide with

anticipation.

"Of course," he murmurs, reaching for Jisung's free hand, lacing their fingers together. Jisung nods, signalling that he's ready.

Initially, Minhø intended to watch the live scan but found himself unable to look away from Jisung once he started speaking.

"Baby, always do so well for me, did you know that?" He starts softly, smiles when Jisung nods as if to answer. "From the very start, you've always been so good, my favourite, my Jisungie."

Jisung sucks in a breath, holds onto Minhø's hand tighter. Part of him wants to look at the live scan, see what's happening, but mostly he's absolutely enraptured by Jisung in front of him.

"You make me so happy," he continues, using his free hand to brush away the hair that had fallen into Jisung's eyes. His pupils are blown, his gaze no longer focused on Minhø but lost in what he's feeling. "No one else makes me feel like how you do, the best thing that's ever happened to me. You're so lovely and smart, absolutely incredible."

His sentiments come to him without much thought, saying whatever comes to mind in a soothing stream, watching in fascination as Jisung's face heats up and his mouth falls open.

"And right now, you're being so good, taking your treat so well, huh?"

Jisung stutters out Minhø's name and he starts to tremble, his leg giving a little kick just before he presses down on the clicker twice.

Minhø is careful not to say anything else that would send anymore signals to Jisung's accomplishment center, but keeps stroking gently through his hair and tells him, "I'm here, Jisung, I'm right here."

It takes a few moments for Jisung to regulate his breathing, for his grip on Minhø's hand to slacken, before he does or says anything. Minhø knows he's getting back to normal when he heaves a sigh and blinks his eyes a few times, his gaze more focused.

"How do you feel?" Minhø asks quietly.

"S-still... hmmm, still re-calibrating," Jisung replies, voice slow. Despite his answer, he keeps talking, his words becoming less disjointed and slurred the more he speaks, "it felt... really good, *s'much* but so, ah, nice."

Minhø smiles, "I'm glad."

"will I-I get t'make-- to make you feel like that?"

"You already make me feel good, Sungie," Minhø tells him, giving his hand a squeeze.

Jisung's face heats up and Minhø realises too late what he's done. "I mean... it's different. Does it work like that for humans?"

Minhø knows he shouldn't answer based on his hunch, not before he's gone over the data, but he also thinks he's seen enough to be confident in his conclusion. "It does."

"So I can do that for you?" Jisung repeats his question.

"Maybe one day," Minhø answers, sounding as hopeful as Jisung does.

"Will you teach me?" He continues, eyes going a little distant again, "because, ah, hyung, Minhø hyung you're so good. How do you do it?" He sighs, "always make me feel the best."

Minhø can't help himself and ducks down to press a kiss to the corner of Jisung's mouth. "It's my pleasure."

And it is; nothing makes Minhø happier than seeing Jisung happy, and he's known that for a long time. He'd do just about anything to make Jisung feel good, and he already feels a little addicted to that blissed out look on Jisung's face.

They stay like that for a little longer, keeping the talking to the minimum so Jisung's accomplishment center isn't activated, and once Jisung gives the okay that he's back to normal they begin to make a move.

Once Jisung is in stasis, Minhø goes back to his office and pulls up the data he needs to go over. He locates the record of the scan from the night of the procedures and the data report for that day and the following three. The data reports are rather minimal, a simple overview that's good for reference, which actually works out for the two of them.

It's the automated data reports that are sent to Minhø's superiors.

Minhø watches the recordings and looks over the reports, comparing function and other vitals that will tell him if anything has been effected. The scans are interesting, show a different pattern; today it took longer for Jisung to reach the same signal intensity than it did the first time, but once the signal did start to pick up, it reached its peak faster.

Minhø also noted that the re-calibration period was longer the second time too, but he needed to take into consideration that he had activated the signal a few times during what was meant to be the rest period.

Overall, the image that the data painted for Minhø was quite clear. Minhø had seen this type of brain activity in humans too, his original idea of what Jisung might be experiencing being correct.

In terms of whether it would be safe for Jisung's limbic to be exposed to that type of activity, Minhø couldn't find any evidence to the contrary. He'd need more data, but he had a feeling Jisung's Centrum was already starting to adapt to it.

Feeling reassured and more than a little excited, Minhø started closing down tabs, ready to head to bed himself, but paused when Jisung's live scan came up on the main interface.

Minhø can see that areas of the cerebrum and frontum are active, but his access to the internet isn't -- so he isn't

researching.

He's *thinking*.

Minho sighs, curious about what thoughts occupy Jisung's mind during the night. More than that, he wishes Jisung didn't have to be subjected to stasis in order to function, wishes that he can go to his bed and that's where Jisung would be.

He finishes shutting down his computer, only to go back to his room and turn on his own personal laptop. The file he works on tonight is titled '*Melatonin Compatibility*'.

"*Hyuuung*," Jisung whines, shuffling around on the bed for the nth time, "are you almost finished?"

Minho bites down on his smile, takes a moment to finish the sentence he's writing before answering. "There's this saying, it goes '*patience is a virtue*', have you ever heard it?"

There's a pause, telling Minho that Jisung is considering the question, and then, "no, but I can research it later if you want. Please, hyung, I've been waiting for almost an hour." Minho can *hear* the pout in his voice.

Minho glances at the clock and sees it's only been forty minutes. "Interesting that you want your reward for being good and yet you're acting like this, hm?" He murmurs, finishing up the last sentence of his log.

Jisung shuffles once again but then seems to still almost entirely.

"I'm good, I'm being good," he says and Minho turns to see Jisung sitting on the bed, legs criss-crossed, and his posture perfect.

Fighting his smile once again, Minho quickly folds up his papers and puts them in an envelope to be sent away. Jisung knew he was going to be in for a bit of a wait this evening, but Minho knows just how much he's anticipating his reward, how much effort he's put in over the last seven days to ensure he's earned it, so he can't blame him for his impatience.

He takes a seat on the bed next to Jisung and reaches out to card his fingers through his hair. Jisung leans into the touch.

"Yes, you are good," he soothes, "you're just excited, aren't you?"

Jisung hums in affirmation, eyes fluttering shut as Minho's fingers scratch the back of his head.

"Cute," Minho coos, leans forward to press a quick kiss to Jisung's lips.

"Thank you, hyung," Jisung mumbles, blinking his eyes open and smiling. One of the newest developments in Jisung's Centrum is that he responds to descriptive affirmations -- words like beautiful and pretty -- after learning about their connotations.

They've spent a few hours over the last few days going over this new set of vocabulary and Minho's found it hard to forget the way Jisung's eyes lit up as he learnt of this new way to talk about things.

"How do you wanna do this, pretty?" Minho asks, interested in Jisung's thoughts. He's mentioned tonight throughout the day, dropping comments here and there about how excited he is, reading out how much time was left on the countdown, letting out quiet little sighs now and again -- it's clearly been on his mind, and Minho wants to know if he's envisioned anything specific.

"Hmm, I was thinking, maybe..." He trails off, as if he's unsure, and Minho makes an encouraging sound, prompting him to keep going. "Would we be able to do it so you can also touch my scar?"

"Your scar?" Minho echos, sliding his hand out of Jisung's hair to trace along the surgery scar at the base of Jisung's neck.

Jisung closes his eyes again, a shiver running through his body. "Yes, because it feels nice," he sighs. "But, only if I earned it. Because the agreement--"

"I think you've earned it, baby," Minho tells him softly.

As it were, Jisung's negative response signal didn't activate often anyways. Jisung's always been exceptional, always followed instructions and completed tasks he was given with rarely an error.

The last seven days, though, he made a concentrated effort and it showed. He was more attentive, asked more questions when he needed to and when it was appropriate, and even improved in certain areas.

He worked faster, worked harder and dialed back the brattiness (not that Minho truly minded that about Jisung, but it was useful to find out how to keep Jisung in check). He wasn't devoid of confirmations for the entire week, but it was the promise of this particular reward -- and what it signified -- that kept him motivated. He told Minho that he knew in theory that his idea would have that effect, but it wasn't until they began that he realised how strong its influence was.

His efforts paid off, not that Minho would have any reason to complain otherwise, but he recognised the work he put in, and he's proud of Jisung. He absolutely deserves what he's asking for, and Minho is happy to oblige.

Jisung sighs happily again, and Minho can tell he's well on the way to getting worked up.

"I'm going to sit behind you, okay?" Minho tells him, getting up so he can slot himself between Jisung and the pillows. He brackets Jisung with his legs, and then tugs on his shirt until his back is pressed against his chest, his arms

looping around Jisung's middle in a back hug.

"Comfortable?" He asks.

"Yes. And you?"

"Very," Minho replies. "Do you remember what to do if you want me to stop and what to do if you want me to slow down?" He checks.

Jisung quickly fishes through his pocket and takes out the clicker Minho had given him before they left his office, presses down on the button once and then waits a few seconds before pressing down twice.

"Good boy," Minho tells him, lowering his voice just slightly. He waits a moment, wanting that signal to cool down, and gathers his thoughts. They hadn't agreed on a set time, Jisung didn't want to know it even if Minho decided on one beforehand.

Minho still isn't sure, thinks he'll just see how it goes and let it happen naturally. He hasn't really thought of what he's going to say, but knows it'll come to him easily.

"I'm gonna start now, you ready?"

"Yes, p-please 'mready, please hyung," Jisung breathes, the sound of his voice like music to Minho's ears.

"Oh, you're so precious, baby" Minho lets the words fall from his lips like a melody, dipping into the familiar, fond cadence he always does whenever he gets to praise Jisung in such an indulgent way. "I know how much you were looking forward to this, how hard you worked, and it's paid off, sweetheart, you were *perfect* for me."

Minho feels Jisung tense just slightly before he exhales quietly and his body relaxes, almost melting against Minho.

"You made me proud, so proud, just like always," he continues softly, lips dropping from Jisung's ear to hover just above the back of his neck. "My angel, you're so good for me."

"M-ma--" Jisung tries, the words stuttering out breathlessly.

Minho holds onto him a little tighter, "what's that, baby?"

"M-madeforyou," he rushes out, taking a deep breath and tries again, "I'm made for you, hyung."

Minho feels his heart thundering in his chest, the notion of *fate* and *destiny* sounding much less fantastical and childlike when they fall from Jisung's lips like the truth.

"Made for me?" Minho echoes, the words dancing on his tongue like starlight. "That's right Jisungie, you were made for me, you're all mine."

"Yours," Jisung sighs, just before Minho presses his lips to the back of Jisung's neck in a wet kiss. Minho delights in the noise Jisung lets out, a low, muted moan in the back of his throat. He kisses along the scar, already enamoured and wanting to hear more of that sound, and it makes Jisung wriggle in his hold.

"Feels good?" Minho asks, mostly to check on Jisung, but also wanting to hear his voice again.

Jisung nods first, makes this whiny noise as if he can't manage any words but then he swallows and answers, "y-yeah, yes--thank you."

Minho breaks out into a smile, leans over to press a kiss to Jisung's cheek. "That's what I like to hear," he tells him. "Ready for more?"

"Mmhmm, yes, please," Jisung's nodding his head again, almost frantically, "gimme more, please hyung. C-can take it. Please."

And Minho does just that, indulging both himself and Jisung as they lose track of time and the world around them, completely enveloped in each other. Minho doesn't know how long he showers Jisung with praise, the words come all too easily, and he gives Jisung all he has. He sets a rhythm, listening to Jisung's responses to tell when he needs to slow down and noticing when Jisung becomes desperate for a stronger signal, creating a push and pull that has Jisung panting and trembling, babbling incoherently by the end.

"I'm gonna stop now, sweetheart, alright?" Minho tells Jisung, squeezing the hand Jisung had laced through his a while ago. Jisung just hums, not able to speak, and Minho brushes his lips against Jisung's neck softly.

"You did so well," he says slowly, wanting to bring Jisung down as gently as he can, "sounded so pretty, so beautiful."

He stops talking then, replacing verbal confirmations with small kisses to Jisung's cheek and jaw, stroking his thumb across the back of Jisung's hand, until his breathing becomes a little more regular.

"Do you wanna lie down?" Minho asks after a few minutes. When Jisung gives him a nod, Minho carefully rearranges them so they're laying down wrapped up in each other, Minho's arm holding Jisung to him while Jisung curls up next to Minho, resting his head on his chest. They stay like that for some time, Minho stroking Jisung's hair and listening to his breathing.

When Jisung's breaths match Minho's, he finally speaks in a sweet whisper, "thank you, Minho." He seems to curl himself even further into Minho's side, sounding shy as he adds, "I don't know if there's a stronger word to convey gratitude, but if there is I'll use it. That was incredible, t-the best I've *ever* felt. Thank you so much." He buries his head in Minho's shoulder.

Minho's blushing, not even trying to fight his smile. "You're welcome, Jisungie. You earned it, remember? You deserved all of it."

Jisung starts moving then, struggling a little with his still re-calibrating Centrum, but he pushes himself up so he can look at Minho. His cheeks are still flushed.

"You deserve to feel like that too," Jisung tells him seriously, "I can't wait until I can make you feel that good," he adds, voice slipping into something dreamier.

Minho can't wait either, the sounds Jisung made and the way he moved against Minho made it an exercise in self-control, but he's always been good at reigning in those kinds of feelings. It would be worth the wait, and all he needs right now is to know he can still make Jisung happy, make him feel good.

"Soon, baby," Minho whispers. Jisung closes his eyes and nods like it's a promise.

When he opens his eyes, he's still looking at Minho with that, albeit a little glazed over, resolve and says, "for now, I can still give you this." He leans down and gives Minho a kiss, not rushed or frantic but slow and sensual, purposeful and full of meaning.

Minho's eyelashes flutter, wanting nothing more than to exist in this moment for as long as he can. He holds Jisung close, helps him to settle more comfortably against him, and welcomes the warmth Jisung presses against him, the warmth shared between their hearts.

When they part, Jisung doesn't go far, stays so close they're sharing the same air, seemingly having forged their own atmosphere among cloud nine.

He smiles sweetly down at Minho, his eyes sparkling in a way they weren't able to before, but now they look like Minho's favourite constellation.

"You're so wonderful, Minho," he whispers, "you're everything that makes a person good, you're my favourite thing in the whole world."

The words wrap Minho up in a hug, and he can feel the way his eyes become glassy with emotion he knows is too early to speak aloud.

"I'm so lucky to have you," Jisung grins, eyes crinkling, "you're--you're--"

"I'm yours," Minho cuts in gently, the urge to say the words too strong for him to wait, "I'm yours, Jisung, just as much as you are mine."

Jisung's jaw goes slack, his pupils dilate and it makes Minho's heart soar. Jisung blinks, the grin returning to his lips as he echos, "you're mine, and I'm yours."

Minho seals the promise with another kiss.

A little lost in the glitter of his own feelings, Minho finds himself thanking his lucky stars for his happiness and when he realises, he lets it go.

He's content with accepting that you have to make room for fate to offer explanations for things that science just can't explain.

Chapter 9 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53673619/chapters/150644380>)

Summary:

in which Jisung learns that things have to get worse before they can get better.

Notes:

hello. im back!! ive been overthinking a lot about wether i wanted to continue this story and it almost got to the point where i deleted everything but !!! reading your comments have truly helped a lot !!! im genuinely so thankful for every single person showing love to this work i appreciate you <333 ive been all over the place recently but i finally got a confident boost and managed to pull this chapter!!

ill make sure to respond to all the comments later, ive read them all but i got q little overwhelmed Kskdlcl also

i couldnt comprehend how to do the collection thing for the life of me, so i decided to post part 2 on here....

i hope you all enjoy!!

Listening to Jisung talk is definitely one of Minhø's favourite things. His voice -- deep, soothing and calm -- is beautiful, of course, but Minhø absolutely *basks* in his excitement and passion, the way he rambles uninhibited when he talks about something he loves. It's clear that, at times, his *centrum* moves too quickly for his mouth to keep up and occasionally he'll mix up words and have to start again. Sometimes he doesn't even realise it's happened.

Minhø thinks it's adorable; he imagines hours drifting by with the two of them just picking each other's brains, getting to know all that Jisung thinks and feels.

Another one of Minhø's favourite things is making Jisung feel good; getting to help him lose himself in the sensations he loves so dearly. He has a preoccupation with feeling good, with doing things that make him, and Minhø, happy.

It's such a simple philosophy, such a pure, genuine idea of what it means to live and be alive. Being the one Jisung trusts to explore all those things with makes Minhø feel honoured, makes him feel special.

Aside from the sappy, sentimental side of things, it's *fun*. Getting to watch Jisung dissolve into nothing but synapses and sensation -- being the reason behind it -- has to be one of life's greatest joys. They don't get as much time as they would like, but they don't waste a second of whatever opportunity arises.

Minhø knows Jisung wishes he could do the same for him, that he gets frustrated with himself for not being able to break from his coding, but Minhø is always there with reassurances of *soon* and the promise that getting to make a mess of him is more than enough.

And tonight, Minhø is lucky enough to get the best of both worlds.

Jisung is lying down on the bed, legs spread with Minhø sitting between them. He's wearing his cotton shorts and his shirt has been pushed up, leaving his chest exposed.

Tonight they're playing with his sensitivity, light and teasing touches meant to work Jisung up slowly.

Jisung's always been more sensitive than most subjects, and Minhø is actually fairly certain that his sensitivity has increased over time. For the most part, it doesn't mean much because his sensitivity is just a *sensation* -- it's neutral. But when Minhø touches him, it becomes something else.

"Tell me more, baby," Minhø encourages, running his hands up and down Jisung's thighs -- his touch featherlight. "Do you have a favourite song of his?"

Jisung hums distractedly, stalling. They've been doing this for some time by now, and while it isn't an onslaught of stimulation, more of a barely there thrum buzzing through Jisung's body without tipping him over the edge, it's enough to affect him.

They've experimented with it before, but not to this extent. It had been Jisung's idea; he'd asked Minhø if he could play with him like this -- touching him, but keeping verbal confirmations to a minimum. He wanted to see what it would be like.

"I... I like 'Kissss of Fire' -- *o-oh*," Jisung pants, face blushing a deeper red. "Ha h-hyung," he whines, eyes falling shut.

Minhø giggles, scratches down Jisung's thighs again to watch the way he trembles just slightly. His thighs have always been particularly sensitive, and Jisung's discovered he enjoys sharper sensations -- like the drag of Minhø's nails against his skin, or soft pinches and slaps. Minhø thinks it's cute, and is more than happy to indulge him.

"Your favourite song is called 'Kissss of Fire'?" He mimics the way Jisung had drawn out the word, runs his hands up Jisung's thighs and along his sides as he moves to hover over him, leans down to kiss along his jaw.

"Hnng," Jisung whimpers when Minhø lingers, nipping lightly at his throat. "It's called 'Kiss of Fire'," he corrects himself.

Minhø pushes himself up so Jisung can see his smile. It's hard not to praise him, confirmations come so easily to him now that he has to fight against the instinct to say how good Jisung is doing. He knows he's working hard too, that his limbic is overpowering a lot of his other processes and that *thinking* is actually kind of difficult.

But tonight is about *teasing*, it's about giving Jisung enough to feel good but making sure what he really wants lingers just out of reach.

"Kiss of Fire?" Minhø echoes, his smile widening as Jisung nods quickly in confirmation. Unable to help himself, Minhø leans down for a kiss that isn't as chaste as he intended it to be. "Is it because you like kissing?" He mumbles the question against Jisung's mouth, biting down on his bottom lip without waiting for an answer.

"I like kissing," Jisung breathes out, cheeks flushed and eyes glazed over, when Minhø finally pulls away. His lips are wet with spit, kissed a stunning, deep red and slightly swollen. His eyes are a little hooded, caught between getting lost in all he's feeling and trying his best to do what Minhø tells him to do.

He looks like art.

"I know you do, pretty," Minhø tells him, ducks down to kiss down the column of his throat and continues down his chest. "But is that why you like the song?"

Minhø glances up to see Jisung shaking his head, lip caught between his teeth as if to keep quiet. His eyes are shut tight now, his brows furrowed; he's thinking. Minhø decides to ease up a little, settles back down between Jisung's legs and just softly runs his hands over the tops of Jisung's thighs.

He gets the feeling that there's something quite genuine Jisung wants to say, and while Minhø loves teasing him,

he also wants to hear what he's trying so hard to put into words.

"S'because it's romantic," Jisung finally manages, blinking his eyes open slowly. "'N it's intimate. The song is about being in love," he adds, lips curving into a dreamy smile.

"In love?" Minho echoes. It's a notion that's happily haunted him the last few months. He'd been wondering when Jisung might stumble across it himself. "And you like that, do you?" He asks, repositioning himself so he can reach Jisung's thighs with his lips.

He waits until Jisung starts to speak to press his lips to his soft skin, delighting in the way the word turns into a whine.

"What was that, sweetheart?" He prompts before continuing, leaving a trail of wet kisses over every inch of skin he can reach.

"I-I do like it, think it's a b-beautiful... expression of emotion. 'N the melodies--" the rest of whatever he was going to say is cut off by a staccatoed moan. Minho's kisses had turned harsher, sucking and biting at his tender flesh.

Jisung doesn't bruise very easily, mostly due to his biology, which Minho thinks is a shame, but it just means he can have more fun trying.

"Why'd you stop, Sungie?" He teases.

"Hy-Hyung," Jisung stutters in reply.

"What is it?" Minho lifts his head up to look at Jisung and their gazes meet. The sight of Minho between his legs must do something for Jisung because his face heats up again and he lets his head fall back against the pillows.

"Feels good, s' nice," he mumbles, words almost slurred.

"What feels good?"

"W-when you touch me," Jisung sighs, "want more, please?"

"What more could I do for you, baby?" Minho asks, eyeing a reddish looking mark on Jisung's inner thigh. He licks it wet before blowing over the area, making Jisung shiver. The barely there bruise would be healed in a matter of minutes. "Isn't this enough?"

"No, hnnng--no, you know it's not."

Minho's eyes flicker back up and he can see Jisung pouting a little. Jisung likes playing these games, this not being the first time he's shown particular interest in being teased, but once he's worked up he gets impatient when he's denied more.

Physical touch is good, they already know it produces similar effects in Jisung's limbic as verbal confirmations do but they don't activate a signal, not in the same way. A combination of both is Jisung's favourite, but hearing Minho shower him with praise and compliments always comes first, always produces the strongest signals and reactions.

Minho thinks it's mostly due to Jisung's coding, the way centrum is designed, but the fact that certain types of physical contact produces any type of positive sensation is phenomenal in of itself. It makes Minho think that, at one point in the future, physical sensation might feel just as good as verbal confirmation.

That is to say, yes, Minho does know that being touched isn't enough for Jisung. It doesn't give him what he really wants, and being teased like this is only going to make him desperate for what will make him feel best.

"That seems a little greedy to me," Minho sits up, gaze locked with Jisung's once more. "Are you a greedy boy, Jisungie?" He raises a brow in question.

"No, no," he shakes his head quickly and it has Minho fighting a smile. "I'm not-- I'm a good boy, am I a good boy?"

"That's up to you, isn't it?"

"Hnnng hyung--"

"What do you want, Jisung?" Minho asks, squeezing Jisung's thighs firmly.

"I wanna be your good boy," he whispers, wide eyes staring up at Minho.

Minho melts a little, has to fight the urge to pepper Jisung's blushing cheeks with kisses and settles for a soft smile instead. "That's cute," he moves his hand from Jisung's thigh up to his tummy and starts drawing random patterns with his finger. "If you want to be my good boy, Jisungie, why don't you keep talking about 'Kiss of Fire' for me, hmm?"

"I--okay," he nods, expression morphing into soft determination, distracted by Minho's finger still dancing across his stomach. He's not ticklish, not in the traditional sense, but lighter touches over his belly makes him squeamish. "The melody... is-- catchy 'n lively, I think i-it, *ah*, has a heavy bassline an- *oooh*--"

Minho had tugged Jisung forward, hooking Jisung's legs over his hips so he could reach further up his chest without leaning over. He hadn't expected it to have taken Jisung by surprise. "You okay, Jisung?"

"Yeah, jus' didn't expect that... felt nice." He mumbles, Minho barely able to catch the last few words.

"What felt nice, baby?" Minho asks, curious.

"Being moved like that," he replies, a little louder this time, but he sounds unsure.

"It's called being '*manhandled*', and it's normal for people to enjoy it when it's like this," he explains, wanting to soothe whatever confusion or doubt Jisung might be experiencing. "We can explore it more later, if you'd like?"

"A-ah, yes please," he smiles. "Do I keep going, Minho hyung?"

“Yes, baby--” Minho cuts himself off, catching the casual praise he’d almost let slip. He ducks down, presses a soft kiss to Jisung’s tummy. “Keep going for me,” he encourages, sitting up before slowly walking his fingers up Jisung’s chest.

“It reflects the idea of passionate love. A-and arouse— I mean, lust,” Jisung begins, face twisted in concentration. Minho watches him as intently as he’s listening, fingers absentmindedly swirling around Jisung’s chest. “And uh oh—they--the lovers have kissed only o-once.”

Jisung’s eyes find Minho’s, his gaze intense and searching. “What does that mean, Jisungie?” Minho asks, figuring Jisung’s looking for some guidance or structure.

“It must have happen-ah-ah-- oh, *fuck*,” Jisung sputters, his carefully constructed concentration shattering as he throws his head back and squirms, legs involuntarily squeezing together around Minho’s hips.

“Language,” Minho chides, but he’s having trouble holding back a smile. His fingers are still circling Jisung’s nipples, letting his nail scratch over them lightly to hear him let out a muted moan. It’s what they learnt last time they played like this -- that Jisung’s nipples are wonderfully sensitive.

“Sss-sorry, ‘m sorry,” Jisung pants, trying and failing to compose himself. Jisung picked up swearing from the movies he’s watched, but he doesn’t curse often. They usually slip out at times like this, when Jisung is too overwhelmed and needs something to express the feeling. Truthfully, Minho doesn’t really have a problem with it -- thinks it’s kind of hot, actually -- but the opportunity to tease is too good to pass up.

“Can you keep going for me, pretty?” Minho asks, not waiting for Jisung to collect himself.

It’s something else they’re experimenting with.

They know a constant stream of stimulation isn’t putting Jisung at risk, that his *centrum* can handle the activity in his limbic. Jisung knows what to do if anything ever becomes too much, understands that even if he *wants* to continue, he has to tell Minho so he doesn’t hurt himself. Pushing him like this is safe, pushing him to focus on his other processes past the pleasure he’s feeling is all part of what they’re doing.

They also know that when the activity in his centrum is this all over the place, Jisung’s negative response signal tends to get lost in it all, doesn’t activate as strongly as it would otherwise. The main focus of tonight -- just like any other night they have the time to spend together -- is to enjoy themselves, but it would be a lovely bonus if they could find a way for Jisung to push past his coding; to disobey Minho’s orders.

Minho isn’t sure if an overloaded *centrum* counts as breaking the code, but at the very least it would be a starting point.

“Feels so good--so good,” Jisung babbles softly, letting out a sharp gasp that dissolves into a moan when Minho pinches his hardened nipple between two fingers. “Please don’t stop,” he begs.

“If you don’t want me to stop, you better keep talking,” Minho warns.

“Mmmhng,” Jisung bites down on his lip, jerking his head nodding. “I can--I can--the lyrics. Yes?”

“What do the lyrics mean?” Minho prompts. “I’m listening,” he reassures Jisung before he starts to lean down, kissing across Jisung’s chest slowly, building anticipation.

“Encapsulating t-the lovers in fire s-symbolism, ma-king them--*ah*, resemble natural e-elements, conveys the ephemeral passion a-and essence of their love,” he manages, sighing when he finishes.

Minho is more than a little impressed, and is completely taken away by Jisung’s intelligence -- this not just being what he’s heard through the song but his own unique interpretation; what he feels when he listens to music. Minho wishes he could tell Jisung how well he’s doing, how smart he is, how proud Minho is of him.

But he can’t, not right now. It’ll have to wait for later.

What Minho *can* do, and what he does do, is press his lips to one of Jisung’s nipples, flicking his tongue across the hard nub before sucking lightly.

Jisung jerks, lets out a breathy whine, sounding like whatever noise he was trying to make got caught in his throat, and Minho feels him scrambling for something to hold onto -- reaches out for Minho’s hand. When he feels Jisung’s hand grasping his, Minho laces their fingers together, squeezes reassuringly.

Minho scraps his teeth over Jisung’s nipple lightly before licking over the skin again. When he moves away, he blows a puff of cool air over the area to watch Jisung break out into goosebumps and to hear him whine.

“Feels good?” Minho asks, using his free hand to pinch at Jisung’s other nipple.

“Yea--yeah, hng, again, please hyung.”

“You think you could keep talking to me, pretty?”

“I’ll t-ry, please,” he babbles, begging. Minho isn’t sure he’s heard him this breathless, this incoherent -- not when he needs to be otherwise.

“Good baby, don’t stop talking,” he instructs him carefully, kissing across Jisung’s chest once more.

Minho repeats the same actions as before, starts with flicking his tongue across Jisung’s nipple, and he gets the same reaction -- Jisung keens, arches up against Minho’s mouth, and lets out a series of babbles and moans.

But he’s not talking.

Minho continues for a few seconds longer, works him up even more, before he lifts his head to look at Jisung. Jisung’s head is thrown back, his entire face and neck flushed, and his tongue is poking out from between his parted

lips, panting.

"You're not speaking, baby?" He waits to see if Jisung is just lagging, if he just wasn't *able* to talk -- wants to see if he'll start up a stream of apologies, if maybe disobeying such a direct order will activate his negative response signal.

What he's really hoping will happen is--

"No, don't wanna-- *think*, jus' please, no more thinking, n'more talking, jus' wanna feel *good*, feels so good hyungie, *ah*," he mumbles, his words coming fast and without restraint -- like water bursting from a broken dam. "Please, please, feels too good, just wanna--" he cuts himself off, lets out a few panted breaths.

"You don't want to talk anymore, Jisungie?" Minho echoes, moves so he's hovering over Jisung, using both hands to prop himself up so he can see Jisung's face.

Jisung senses him, opens his eyes -- practically sparkling -- to find his gaze.

"Nuh-uh," he shakes his head, pouting cutely.

"Even though I want you to?" Minho checks, searching Jisung's expression carefully.

"No, no, don't-- *oh*." Realisation washes over Jisung, his eyes impossibly wide as his jaw falls slack. "Hyung, did-did I--?"

"Yes, I think so," Minho tells him. "But it's good, it's alright, you're alright?"

"Mmhhh," Jisung hums, still too out of it for the gravity of it all to settle properly. "Feels good," he repeats, sighing sweetly.

"I know it does," Minho whispers, not sure what exactly Jisung is referring to anymore. "Let me make you feel good," he says against Jisung's lips before drawing him into a kiss.

But after a moment, it's Jisung who pulls away first, brows furrowed as he asks, "You're not mad?"

"No," Minho is quick to reassure him, reaches out to smooth away his worry, "I'm not mad, not at all. I already told you, it's okay if you don't do what I say-- it's good, Jisungie."

"I know," Jisung swallows, and Minho thinks he might be coming down properly, words still coming slowly but they sound more thought out; "it's just... confusing. I feel like I should apologise, even though I know I haven't done anything wrong. My... my *centrum* is telling me otherwise. Does that make sense?"

"It does, yes," Minho nods, thumb stroking Jisung's cheek softly. Jisung made a distinction between himself and his *centrum* a long time ago, his sentience and sense of self miles beyond how his *centrum* operates.

Minho can't even imagine what it must feel like to be constrained like how Jisung is, to think and feel so independently but ultimately unable to have complete control over himself.

"You don't need to apologise to me, but if you need to so that you won't feel as conflicted, that's alright. Do what you need to, baby," Minho tells him. Minho wants to make sure he knows it won't be the same as taking back his act of disobedience. He doesn't want Jisung to feel uncomfortable, to let whatever signal his *centrum* is sending persist because he might feel that would take away from his display of autonomy.

Jisung thinks about it, closes his eyes as if to block out everything around him. A moment later he blinks and looks at Minho with determination.

"I'm not going to apologise," he says firmly, nodding once to make it definitive.

Minho nods too, wants to give as neutral a response as possible for now. Later, he'll ramble on and on about how proud he is but for now he just wants Jisung's decision to be his own, not influenced or shaped by Minho's reaction. After a moment, he does ask, "how are you feeling?"

"There's still... a lot going on," he brings a hand up to motion to his head before letting it fall down on the pillow next to him, boneless. "But I feel good, you're so good to me."

Minho feels his ears heating up, smile so wide his cheeks hurt. "Only because you deserve it," he ducks down, pressing a line of kiss along Jisung's jaw. He waits a moment before carefully asking, "do you want to talk about it?"

Minho's been making an effort to keep his doctor's coat in his office, to keep the time he and Jisung have for each separate from heavy discussion about his *centrum*. It's not just that he knows it's something Jisung notices (although, Jisung still insists it doesn't make him upset), but it's something he feels is unfair himself. He doesn't think it's right for Jisung's *centrum* to take precedence over everything else, not in situations where it's not meant to.

But right now, Minho also feels this is something they should discuss, even if it's just briefly.

"Yes, we can talk about it," Jisung replies.

"And we can watch a movie after, if you want," Minho promises, repositioning himself so he's lying down next to Jisung, facing him on the bed.

Jisung turns to his side too, a small smile on his lips. "It's okay, hyung. We've both been waiting for this."

This being Jisung's first signs of autonomy, and to say they've been waiting is an understatement.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Minho asks. "Or," he rethinks how to best discuss it, "describe how you felt?"

Jisung hums as he thinks, hand coming up to ruffle his bangs out of his eyes and Minho wonders if his adoration is too obvious. The way he shakes out his hair is one of the few habits Jisung has developed -- completely independent of his *centrum*, it's just something he does, like any other human.

"Well, I was feeling good," he starts, smile shy as he states the obvious. "But it felt different, the activity in

my limbic wasn't as strong as I wanted it to be. I was feeling... desperate?" Jisung pauses, looking for confirmation that he was using the word correctly for the context. Minho gives him an encouraging nod, and he continues.

"And I think because I'd been given no confirmation signals, the desperation was more intense," he squeezes his eyes shut at the memory, sighing out, "*so intense*."

"Do you think the absence of confirmation heightened what you were feeling?" Minho asks.

"Yes, I do. because I knew I was doing what you told me to do, but I also knew I couldn't expect confirmation. Not having that signal... I just wanted you to keep touching me." The shyness returns as his cheeks flush pink, but Jisung doesn't look away from Minho.

"You're so cute," Minho coos softly, reaching for Jisung's hand to press a kiss to the back of his palm. After a moment, he asks, "what does that mean, though? How did that stop you from talking like I instructed?" He has his own ideas, of Jisung valuing the physical sensation more than whatever activity his obedience was mustering in his limbic, but Jisung's perspective is always far more insightful. He also wants Jisung to come to his own conclusions about it.

"I think... it was a lot of things. In the moment, I knew you wanted me to talk but I wanted to focus on how I felt. It was hard to concentrate on both things, and focusing on what *you* were doing... was more appealing, in the end."

"Huh, that's interesting," Minho murmurs, thoughts running through what this all could imply.

"Tell me," Jisung shoves lightly at Minho's shoulder. He gets excited whenever he can tell Minho is *thinking* of something, wants to know what it is even before Minho has figured out if it's worth sharing.

"It sounds like you weighed up what options would give you the most satisfaction, and that's the one you chose to follow. It was based on what you wanted, rather than what I wanted," Minho tells him, wording himself carefully. It's just the general impression he got from what Jisung had told him, nothing he has any real basis for.

What is important, though, was that Jisung found more value in an option that would result in disobeying an order. It might not work the same way in a situation where Jisung is being told to do something he just doesn't want to do, but it still breaks the fundamental coding of his *centrum*.

However, Minho's words have Jisung frowning. "I don't like how that sounds," he says, "I want to do what you tell me, I like doing that. I want what you want."

"Hey, this isn't a bad thing," Minho is quick to tell him, squeezing his hand to grab his attention. It's a preoccupation he's always had, for as long as Minho's been aware of the depth of his sentience and maybe even longer than that. It's something he enjoys, something he finds pleasure in, and to an extent there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But Jisung can't prioritise what Minho wants if it interferes with him gaining his autonomy.

"You can still want what I want, even if you want other things. Having autonomy won't change that about you if it's something you'll continue to enjoy. But you *know* there might be some things that I want that you won't want, and I'm not talking about situations like tonight." Minho makes sure Jisung is looking at him, keeps his voice firm so Jisung knows he's serious.

Jisung does want autonomy, has talked about how the idea of becoming more human makes him *happy*. But at the same time, it goes against his nature; Jisung's also talked about the conflicting signals he has to fight against, like tonight, when he felt the need to apologise when he knew he didn't have to. With his *centrum* still controlling so much of his actions, Minho has noticed how easy it can be for Jisung to lose sight of his goal.

"I know, really, I do," Jisung promises. "It's just *hard*," he huffs, cheeks puffing out, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. Minho stays on his side, gazing over his profile.

"Disobeying me means that you'll never have to do anything someone else wants you to do ever again," he reminds Jisung, voice a soft murmur hoping to draw him away from whatever negative thoughts he might be having.

Jisung hums in acknowledgement, and Minho can see a smile stretching out across his face. "And then the only person I'll obey is you," he replies quietly. "I'll be yours, only."

"You are mine." The words fall from his mouth before Minho realises it. It's nothing he hasn't said before, a sentiment they both find comfort in, but he doesn't miss the firmness of his tone, sounding more possessive than he'd like to.

There is a truth to that possessiveness, where the alternative is Jisung belonging to the *centrum* program, which neither of them want. But Minho would prefer to keep that emotion under wraps, knows that it's particular ugliness won't be helping Jisung in gaining his own independence.

He's ready with an amendment, an unnecessary reminder that, "you know I don't mean it like--"

"Yes, I know," Jisung cuts him off gently in a voice that says *you think too much, Minho hyung*. "But I like hearing it, could you say it again? Please?" He turns his head to the side, eyes wide like the world's cutest kitty. It's ridiculously unfair just how much power that look has over Minho.

"You're mine," Minho grins, entirely too endeared.

"Again?"

"You are mine," Minho repeats, brings his hand up to cup Jisung's cheek.

"One more time?" Jisung asks, blissed out.

Minho pushes himself up so he's hovering over Jisung again, presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "You belong to me, Jisung."

Jisung makes a happy sound before he pulls Minho down for a real kiss, throwing his arms around his neck to hold him close.

When they part, Minho whispers against Jisung's lips, "and what about me?"

"Mine," Jisung breathes, not a second of hesitation. "Mine, mine, you're all mine, Lee Minho-ssi."

The rush of adrenaline through his body and the flutter of his heart has Minho glowing, so hopelessly, hopelessly in--

"That's right, baby," he tells him, leaning in for another kiss.

"A-are we finished talking?" Jisung asks a moment later, stuttering when Minho nipped at his jaw.

"Do you call this talking?" Minho pulls away, chuckling softly.

"No--I mean, do we have anything else we need to discuss?"

"Nothing we can't talk about tomorrow. Why? Do you want to watch a movie now?"

"Not exactly." Jisung looks down, averting his gaze. "I want to try something else."

"You do?" Minho raises a brow, curious.

"You mentioned me choosing between two things, deciding which one would make me feel the best, the one I want more," Jisung elaborates, voice small.

"That's right," Minho prompts.

"I have an idea to test that." Jisung finally looks up, cheeks flushed.

"I'm listening."

A few moments later and Minho is sitting on the edge of the bed, legs spread to accommodate Jisung kneeling between them. There's a palpable tension between them, both of them knowing exactly what's about to happen, anticipating the outcome.

"You ready, pretty?" Minho asks, fingers tilting Jisung's chin up to meet his eyes.

"Yes, hyung," Jisung replies, nodding once Minho's hand falls away.

"Good boy. You look so good like this, sweetheart," Minho tells him, voice low and alluring. And *oh*, can Minho get used to seeing Jisung like this. "On your knees for me, how does it feel?"

"Feels nice," Jisung decides, and then a second later he adds, much quieter, "makes me feel small."

"Does it?" Minho's question is rhetorical, but Jisung still nods an answer. "You like that?"

"I do," Jisung whispers. Minho tells him to speak up, and so he repeats himself a little louder. "I like it, I like it a lot, hyung."

"How cute," he coos, eyes crinkling with an unrestrained smile. "Ready for your reward?"

Jisung nods excitedly, shuffling even closer in anticipation. Jisung had told Minho there's one thing he's wanted all night.

"Okay, darling, open up," Minho instructs. Jisung's mouth falls open so fast it's almost comical, saliva already pooling against his bottom lip.

He said he wanted Minho's fingers in his mouth.

And that's what Minho gives him; presses three fingers down against his tongue, watches as Jisung's eyes flutter shut and drool starts to spill down the sides of his mouth.

"Jisungie, keep your mouth open." Another instruction, the one that Jisung's idea was meant to test.

Because he wants Minho's fingers, had asked so cutely when they were laying down just before, but he wants to try something else, too. Jisung thinks he wants this more, and all they have to do now is wait to see what happens.

It takes a few seconds, but Jisung blinks and Minho sees his pupils are blown wide. His glazed over eyes find Minho's and slowly he brings his own hand up to wrap around Minho's wrist, holding him in place.

Then, very deliberately, he closes his mouth, his lips circling around Minho's fingers. He swirls his tongue experimentally, dragging along the pad of each finger, and lets out a short hum. He blinks once, gaze more focused as he keeps eye contact with Minho, before he hollows his cheeks and bobs his head, pushing the fingers further into his mouth, down to the knuckles.

There's a pull of arousal in Minho's gut, so strong it makes him heady but it only shows in the way his eyes darken, completely trained on Jisung.

Jisung moves his head again, up and down, mimicking a steady rhythm. Minho lets a sharp smile curve onto his lips, relishes in how Jisung's cheeks turn pink.

He pulls off then, licks cutely at the tips of Minho's fingers before resting them against his bottom lip, waiting.

Minho moves his hand, breaking Jisung's loose hold on him, and wipes his fingers off on Jisung's cheeks (something they'd done once before a long time ago, but Minho's been itching to do it again) before he grips the sides of his face with the same hand, pulling him forward so that their faces are closer.

"And how did that feel, baby?" Minho asks, saccharine sweet.

"Good--really good," Jisung answers quickly, voice breathy.

"Could you be more specific for me?" Minho tilts his head, eyes still dark. "What felt good?"

"Y-your fingers--so good, a-and," he pauses, licking at his lips, "doing what I wanted."

"Is that so?" Minho raises a brow, and Jisung's cheeks turn from pink to red as he nods. "You liked it that much?"

“Yes, hyung.”

Minho loosens his grip, leans forward to whisper, “I’m so proud of you, Sungie. You know that? So proud, baby.”

“I know.” Jisung grins in that peculiar way where his lips look heart shaped. One of Minho’s favourites. “Did it feel good? For you?” Jisung sks, growing a little shy. His hands, now resting on Minho’s knees, curled into loose fists. Minho hums, considers carefully. “It did, it felt good watching you. You looked cute, messy baby,” he croons.

“Thank you, hyung,” he says softly, a shy smile adorning his lips.

“Now, tell me what you were thinking about when you had my fingers in your mouth, baby boy.”

Jisung gapes, cheeks turning scarlett as he fumbles, “I-I– you, I was thinking about y-you.”

Minho’s smile is mocking, “you think I didn’t already know that?” Truth is, he knows exactly what Jisung had been thinking, but he wants to hear him say it.

“Hyung,” Jisung whines, squirming under Minho’s gaze to stall.

“Nuh-uh,” Minho tuts, “I want you to tell me.”

“I-I was thinking about your cock,” he mumbles, voice quiet and shy but he’s looking at Minho, gaze devotional. “...In my--in my mouth.”

“You were?” Minho teases, but he softens seeing the way Jisung nods his head absent minded, as if in a daze.

“You want it that badly, don’t you?” Minho rests his hand on the back of Jisung’s neck, carding through his hair as he nods, wordless once more. “I want to hear you, baby. tell me how bad you want my cock.”

“I want it so much, hyung, please,” Jisung’s voice takes on a pleading edge to it, clasping his hands together and holding them to his chest. “I just wanna be your good boy, make you feel good, please... I want you to use my mouth, I know I can be good--want it so bad, *please* hyung.”

“Oh, I know you’ll be good sweetheart,” Minho soothes him, fingers still in his hair. “You’ve been waiting for so long, but you can wait a little longer, right?”

“Yes, yes I can. Anything for hyung,” Jisung promises after taking a deep breath, the desperation ebbing from his voice.

“Good boy, my good boy,” Minho praises, never tiring of the way Jisung reacts to those words. “Are you alright, Sungie?” Minho checks a moment later, making sure he’s not getting too worked up. They need to wind down soon, can’t risk getting too carried away.

“Mmmh, jus’ excited, and happy,” he replies, smile dreamy.

Minho gives him a smile in return, shuffles back on the bed and pats his thigh to signal for Jisung to join him, if he wants. Jisung climbs into Minho’s lap, arms wrapped loosely around his shoulders as Minho presses a chaste kiss to his lips. “You had fun?” He asks, resting one hand around Jisung’s waist, the other going back to carding through his hair like before.

“I always have fun with you,” Jisung tells him. “It was so *much*, but... hmm, I loved every second.”

“You did so well tonight, angel,” Minho tells him, bringing the hand at the back of his neck around to cup his cheek. “We still have time to watch a movie, if you want?” They’d be pushing it, but they both know it’ll be worth it.

“Yes, please,” he grins, Jisung’s eyes lighting up with a different kind of excitement as he gets off Minho’s lap to let him stand. It’s Jisung’s turn to choose what they’re watching. “And we’ll cuddle too?” He asks, settling down in his spot on the bed and watching as Minho starts setting things up.

“Oh, you know we will,” Minho replies.

The last time they watched a movie was after a night like this, where Jisung wanted to lay down being held by Minho, so the projector is still placed on the same wall Minho’s desk is placed against, opposite the side of the bed. Minho places his laptop down on his bedside table, flicking the projector on while the movie loads before walking over to turn off the light.

He joins Jisung on the bed, pulling up his pick for tonight. It’s a film called *My Tomorrow, Your Yesterday*.

When it’s all ready, they settle down; Jisung snuggling and Minho pulling him close to his chest, their legs tangled together. “Can you see?” Minho whispers, not wanting to break the ambience of the dark room and the flickering projector light.

“Yes,” Jisung answers, just as quietly. “I hope you like it,” he tells Minho, hopeful.

“Of course I will, it’s something you picked out.” It’s true that Minho has enjoyed pretty much all the movies Jisung has suggested they’d watched, gaining some new favourites along the way.

“I watched the trailers and read about the plot,” Jisung continues as the logos are still playing. “It reminded me of us.”

“It did?” Minho turns his head to look at Jisung, a little surprised. He’s never mentioned choosing to watch a movie for that reason before.

“Yeah--oh, watch.” The first scene has started, and Jisung’s already enraptured so Minho turns back to pay attention, curious to know what exactly had Jisung thinking of them.

A little while later, as the film progresses and the characters continue their effortless back and forth with a startling amount of openness and intimacy, Minho starts to understand what Jisung might’ve been seeing.

He only wishes, of course, that he and Jisung could be traipsing around a place as equally stunning and new, as

opposed to the half a dozen sets of the same four walls Jisung's known all his life.

"We'll go there one day," Minho promises, voice a hushed whisper as the credits start to roll.

"Where? To Japan?" Jisung asks, voice equally as quiet. They're both in a bit of a lull, left awestruck by the film.

"Yes, I'll take you. Would you want to go?"

There's a bit of a pause that Minho is just a little too sleepy to think about dissecting. Eventually, Jisung does answer, "Yes, I would. I want to go everywhere with you, Minho hyung."

Carefully, Minho turns so he's facing Jisung in the dark and leans forward to press a sweet kiss to his lips.

One day, he thinks

Notes:

..... if u made it this far, thank you! i'd really love to hear your thoughts and feelings, so feel free to drop a comment!

Close (#)